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NOMINATION OF THE HONORABLE DOUGLAS A. COLLINS TO BE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS UNITED STATES SENATE

ONE HUNDRED NINETEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

JANUARY 21, 2025

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NOMINATION OF THE HONORABLE DOUGLAS A. COLLINS TO BE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 2025

U.S. SENATE,
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 10 a.m., in Room SD–G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Boozman, Cassidy, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Cramer, Tuberville, Banks, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Murray, Sanders, Hirono, Hassan, King, Duckworth, Gallego, and Slotkin.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JERRY MORAN, CHAIRMAN, U.S. SENATOR FROM KANSAS

Chairman MORAN. Good morning everyone, and good morning to my colleagues on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. This hearing will now come to order. I welcome everyone to the first hearing of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for the 119th Congress.

I am grateful to have so many of my colleagues returning to this Committee, and I look forward to continuing our work together. I am also grateful to have five new Members; Senator Banks of Indiana, Senator Sheehy from Montana, Senator Duckworth from Illinois, Senator Gallego from Arizona, and Senator Slotkin from Michigan. Welcome to this Committee.

I look forward, especially, to working with the new Ranking Member, that was me before you. You and I have had the experience of working together previously, and I look forward to continuing our efforts to work together to see that veterans are well cared for, and that Members of this Committee have an opportunity to express their views and make a difference in this arena.

My work on this Committee is almost always driven by what I hear from veterans, particularly at home in Kansas, but also across the country. We will hear from a lot of veterans' organizations as well, and this is about how do we make the VA work better. What is it doing well? What is it not doing well? How do we solve the problems that veterans face in this country? Sometimes one at a time, but I hope, often, veterans as citizens in a group.

As Chairman, I will work to solve problems and deliver results to help veterans access healthcare and benefits they have earned

and achieved in their success in their service. I want them to be successful after their service, and I expect the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs to share a similar focus.

The role of the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs is critical. America's national security is dependent upon an all-volunteer military, and a VA that is successful in helping service members thrive as veterans is key to bolstering recruitment and keeping our Nation safe. Millions of veterans and their loved ones rely on the VA to access higher education and job training, buy a house, open a small business, cope with service-connected conditions, access healthcare, and more.

Helping veterans achieve those goals is often complicated by the fact that VA is one of the largest bureaucracies within the Federal Government with more than 400,000 employees. That includes a massive physical footprint that spans the globe. Our facilities are aging, a legacy IT system, and an annual budget, well over $300 billion.

We must have a VA Secretary who understands the VA mission, who will help refocus the Department to put Veterans first, and who recognized the importance of the VA in serving veterans and contributing to a safe and successful future for our Nation.

I am grateful to have Congressman Doug Collins here today to testify about his nomination to be the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. He knows firsthand the benefits and challenges of military service and many issues facing veterans and their families. I am grateful for Congressman Collins's interest in serving in this capacity, and I look forward to hearing today how he plans to improve and support the lives of his fellow veterans, if confirmed.

I know that military service is family service, so I want to recognize and thank Congressman Collins's family, including his wife, Lisa, daughter, Jordan, and sons, Cameron and Copelan, who are with us here today. Welcome to your family, Congressman.

Before yielding to the Ranking Member, I want to recognize former Secretary of Veterans Affairs, Denis McDonough. I am grateful to Secretary McDonough for his hard work and his dedication to veterans and their families, and I wish him all the best in his next chapter. With that, I yield to the Ranking Member, Senator Blumenthal, for his opening remarks.

OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, RANKING MEMBER, U.S. SENATOR FROM CONNECTICUT

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks so much, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for being here today, Congressman Collins and as well to your family, Lisa, Jordan, and Cameron, and to all the visitors who are here today, many of them veterans.

I am thrilled to be the Ranking Member and to have as Chairman, my friend and colleague, Senator Moran. He and I have a strong working relationship, and it exemplifies, I think, the kind of bipartisanship that has characterized the work of this Committee. In fact, we have been a paragon of bipartisanship in the face of the buffeting winds of political polarization on other topics, and I look forward to fighting and advocating for veterans in the face of some pretty heavy threats.

I was chagrined yesterday that there was no mention in the inaugural address by President Trump about veterans. I was disappointed to see in the Executive orders that a hiring freeze will be imposed, apparently, on the VA. And I am hopeful that you, Congressman Collins, I'm going to be very blunt, will be the kind of advocate that the VA and our veterans will need in this administration.

There will be potentially heavy pressures on you to cut and slash, to reduce access and eligibility, because the VA, frankly, is a target-rich environment for cost-cutters, and we know that there is a Department of Government Efficiency looking for those kinds of cost-cutting opportunities. I look forward to supporting you, and bolstering your efforts to defend and advocate our veterans who must always be a priority.

I want to thank Senator Moran, but also Senator Tester, who was such a strong advocate, as well as Denis McDonough, and most particularly, in our joint efforts to pass the PACT Act. President Biden and Secretary McDonough were instrumental in providing more care and more benefits to veterans than ever before when they were exposed to toxic chemicals or burn pits, not only on the battlefield, but also in training. I think every Member of this Committee can be proud of that effort.

You mentioned in your opening that, "timely access to care and benefits for every eligible veteran is job one." I hope that will be your mantra. It certainly is ours. Unfortunately, veterans are confronted with losing access to VA's direct care system in an unprecedented number of referrals going into the community. As we discussed during our meeting, you and I, and I appreciate your coming by to talk to me, there certainly is an important role for community care in the timely delivery of care to veterans. But it can't be at the expense of the VA direct care system, which many vets prefer and rely on.

I have two sons who have served. One is a combat infantry officer in Afghanistan. The other is a Navy SEAL. And most particularly, my Navy SEAL son has made use of veterans benefits and facilities on the West Coast in West Haven. So, I know firsthand, the extraordinary care, really, it's a gold standard of care that our veterans' facilities provide, and particularly in the area of mental health. We need to invest as well as in modernizing infrastructure and facilities such as we are doing in West Haven.

Today, I want to learn more about your plans to lead the largest civilian agency in the Federal Government. Literally, the largest civilian agency. An organization of more than 450,000 employees comprising 20 percent of our whole federal workforce. That is an awesome responsibility. I am especially interested in how you plan to build a workforce culture that encourages employees to speak up with concern, and criticism, and offer ideas to drive improvements, not one to seek retribution or demand fealty and loyalty at the expense of the quality of veterans' care.

If confirmed, it is your duty to treat every VA employee and veteran regardless of gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation with the dignity and respect they deserve. You and I have acknowledged our differences, and we will have differences of opinion especially on some social policies, but I will need your assurance that your

views will not negatively impact veterans seeking the care and benefits they have earned. They have earned those benefits.

In our meeting, I appreciated your commitment to put the law first and respect the rule of law. With regard to abortion care and counseling, I expect the administration to consider the existing rule legally binding, unless it is replaced or struck down. I believe that rolling back this policy would unnecessarily risk the lives and health of pregnant veterans in states with abortion bans and care restrictions in the post-*Dobbs* era.

During the last Trump administration, we know outsiders exerted significant influence on the VA. In fact, GAO looked into and substantiated that three individuals, private citizens; Bruce Moskowitz, Isaac Perlmutter, and Marc Sherman, referred to as the "Mar-a-Lago Three", played a key role in several high-profile decisions outside of the formal VA decision-making process. These included VA senior level personnel decisions, and involvement in negotiations for the VA electronic record system, among other issues.

I hope you will push back. Push back strongly on inappropriate influences that operate outside of well-established federal transparency rules, especially when they are not acting in the best interests of veterans. Whether it's ideologically minded groups with ulterior motives, or the array of big tech executives that we saw on the platform yesterday at the inaugural, including Elon Musk.

Congressman Collins, if confirmed, you must be the decision-maker at the VA. You must be their advocate and keep the needs of veterans at the forefront. There will undoubtedly be pressure on you to scale back and cut costs at every opportunity, but I can't emphasize how important it will be to me, and I hope all of us on this Committee, that you fight those efforts with every fiber in your being.

I am hopeful we have shared priorities, including upgrading the VA facilities around the country, particularly healthcare facilities, and suicide prevention, which I know is a priority of yours. We discussed it when you visited with me. If you are confirmed, I welcome the opportunity to work with you, to support you, to advocate with you in this administration, and to improve services to veterans in Connecticut and across the country.

Before I turn it over to Senator Moran, I want to just offer on a personal note, I am incredibly disheartened that the Trump administration is canceling the flights of nearly 1,660 Afghan refugees who were already cleared by the U.S. Government to resettle in the United States. These allies aided our troops in Afghanistan. Whatever you think about the conflict there, the risk to these Afghan allies are so dire and dangerous, and many of our veterans groups have been advocates for them.

As you know, in fact, the strongest advocates for resettling those at risk Afghan allies are the veterans who benefited from their protection and their service, which involved putting their own lives and their families on the line. And yet, those Afghan partner forces and their families are stuck at the risk of harm in areas around the world.

Our Nation has a sacred promise that we have made to do right by the men and women who risk their lives for our freedoms and

democracy, and do right for their families. And that includes those translators, the guards, the others that put their backs in targets and became our loyal friends. And I will keep fighting to ensure that they are resettled to the United States and push back against any attempts by the administration to renege on those promises to our service members, veterans, and Afghan allies.

And again, I want to offer thanks to all of the VSOs, all the individual veterans who came to the defense of those Afghan at risk allies, and have joined us in urging aid and freedom for them. Again, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal, thank you. I now call on one of our colleagues who is a Member of this Committee, Congressman Kevin Cramer is a former colleague in the House of our witness, the nominee, and I now recognize Senator Cramer.

INTRODUCTION BY HON. KEVIN CRAMER, U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH DAKOTA

Senator CRAMER. Thank you, Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal. The titles look good on both of you. I am looking forward to a productive term, and it is a great honor and really a blessing for me to be able to be here to introduce my former colleague, friend, Navy veteran, a military chaplain, accomplished attorney, Doug Collins.

In fact, if we were to write up, you know, there is a lot of talk these days about people being unqualified for these positions when the reality is in our great system of self-governance, the only qualification is that the elected people want you. But if we were to write up the qualifications for VA administrator, for VA secretary, Doug Collins picture would probably be right next to the description.

Working with Doug on big bipartisan things, I remember in the House, one of the most unlikely things in the world for me to get involved in was copyright law and looking out for the rights of songwriters. And yet, somehow, Doug's big personality and big brain sucked me right in, and I'm glad I did. It was important work. And it was kind of really precedent setting work in the area of entertainment. But he's got that kind of a personality, an engaging personality that attracts people to what he is working on. And I think that says a lot.

I mentioned he is an accomplished attorney because that is an important part of both understanding, Senator Blumenthal, the law and enforcing the law, carrying out the laws, defending the laws that are passed by Congress and become part of the bureaucracy.

Obviously, him being a veteran in the Navy and Air Force Reservist is important. He relates directly to the experiences of our veterans. He was deployed to Iraq. He knows a thing or two about the experience of the veteran. I think that is part of what, to your point Senator Blumenthal, makes the VA care so special. It's not that they are better doctors, or better psychiatrists, or better nurses, or technicians, it's that they are empathetic. That is what I hear from my veterans so oftentimes; is while they appreciate access to community care, they appreciate the empathy of a fellow veteran, and Doug brings that.

But guys, he is a chaplain. I mean, come on. How perfect is that? Because to me, one of my great frustrations about the VA, I mean, this is last summer, a $15 billion shortfall is announced. Where was all the communication before that? Where was the transparency that we would seek before that? And then suddenly panic sets in, fear and anxiety, uncertainty, even to the point where Congress itself passed a supplemental. We all remember it very well. A supplemental where a single dollar was never used because, lo and behold, there wasn't a $15 billion shortfall. How does that happen in a competent agency that's looking out for the veteran?

And so, Doug brings the legislative experience. He helped pass the VA MISSION Act, the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, these things that provided the transparency which we seek. He knows the intent of Congress. He's a lawyer who understands them, but he's a chaplain who understands the recipient and the need at the moment, and I'm just really, really grateful that he's my friend.

I've known many, many good people, Republicans and Democrats, who've sought a position in the VA, and every one of them was well intentioned, and every one of them was certain that they would break through. That they would be the one that would make the difference. That they'd be the one that would take the opportunities for care closer to home and put them on the front page of the website instead of burying them deep so that they never find them.

But we do have now in the commander in chief and a cabinet that he's picking, people who will put the veteran first, not the bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is important. The service providers are important, but the most important person is the veteran. And that's who Doug Collins will look out for. And I'm really, really grateful that he's my friend, that he's willing to step into this gap, and I'm ready to support him in every way possible. And so, I introduce to you, Congressman Doug Collins.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Cramer, thank you for your statement and support, your introduction of the nominee. And thank you for your membership, and efforts, and hard work on this Committee.

Douglas A. Collins, you and I need to rise, and I'm going to ask you to take an oath. Would you raise your right hand? Do you, Congressman Doug Collins, solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony you're about to give before the United States Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Mr. COLLINS. I do.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Congressman, thank you again for being here, and we will now eagerly await your testimony.

STATEMENT OF HON. DOUGLAS A. COLLINS, NOMINEE TO BE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Blumenthal, the rest of this Committee, and looking around this Committee, seeing people that I've worked with before on both sides of the aisle. And it's good to see you and especially to the new Members as well.

I am honored to be sitting here to be the nominee for the next Secretary of the VA. I'd like to thank my friend, Kevin Cramer for that kind introduction. I appreciate his work, and I appreciate your work as well. He hit it perfectly; it's about the vet, and I thank him for that.

I'd also like to thank President Trump for his nomination, and for his willingness to have not only confidence in me, but also the veterans of this country. I'm privileged today, and I appreciate the Chairman and Ranking Member mentioning my family, because I would not be here without them.

My wife of 36 years is with me, Lisa. She's right here. I have my son, Copelan, and his wife Holly. I have my son, Cameron, his fiancée, Maddie. And then on the end, we have the one that glues us all together, and that is Jordan. She is our daughter. But there's also one that probably is watching right now that I'd be remiss if I didn't mention, and it's my 86-year-old father who spent 31 years as a Georgia State Trooper. Dad, I'm here because of you and mom, and I love you.

You know, America's the greatest nation on earth. And it's the greatest nation on earth, I believe, because of the men and women who serve. It's the men and women who serve and willingness to take the step up to protect the freedoms that we hold so dear. And throughout my two decades of service, I've witnessed this firsthand. I have watched men and women go at their best, even when they didn't want to. And they served and they stood up for our freedoms, and they earned the benefits of being in our great veterans system. And the VA is there for them.

In addition to being a Navy veteran for a while, I've now been in the United States Air Force for over 23 years. I'm a colonel serving at the Warner Robins Air Force Base Reserve Command, and I have been able to watch over the years, leadership. Leadership is about listening, but it's also about leading. It's also about taking the men and women that you serve with and making sure that you're putting their needs first. When you're in the military, it's about the mission. For me, if I'm confirmed by this body, the VA will be my mission. It'll be the mission to take care of our veterans and to make sure they get the benefits that they deserve.

I am an Iraq War veteran. I understand burn pits because I slept next to one for many months. I understand this generation that went time and time again, deployment after deployment, in a different way than we'd seen many times before in our past wars and the needs that they have. But also, being a veteran, I think I also bring something that is unique to this position almost since it became a cabinet position.

I'll be the first Member of this Hill, House or Senate to serve, if confirmed by this body, which I think brings a different perspective to my service here. Because over the years, we've all had our differences in this body, and Ranking Member, I appreciate you mentioning, yes, we have differences. But we can agree because I have worked across this aisle to pass major legislation.

Thanks to President Trump and this body, we passed the First Step Act, giving real criminal justice reform with my partner, Hakeem Jeffries, in the House. Music Modernization Act, which Senator Cramer mentioned, Defend Trade Secrets Act with Chris

Coons and many others. These are the kind of things that make big differences when you cross and you give good ideas. For me, it is about having respect for the Members. It's about having respect for this Committee. And that is what I believe this Committee is; one of the most bipartisan here I have learned and worked bipartisanly to make things happen in this country. Because, also, I believe that we have a lot we're in common with, on both sides of this Committee's eyes.

I believe also that there is timely access and care for our veterans, for every eligible person. I believe that we're actually supposed to reach out. And the MISSION Act provides that template that we passed here, that I was a part of, passing the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, which passed, by the way, in this body unanimously, that holds our veterans' workers and the workers who touch our veterans to the highest standards possible.

I will tell you right now, the veterans, VA will not have a stronger fighter for the employees in the workforce than this Secretary, if confirmed. And, also, one that will make sure that we're held accountable because good work begets good work, and others need to be held accountable. We will do that to make sure that we get the best for our veterans.

The PACT Act, which was mentioned by the Ranking Member, something that I think we're still developing and making sure everybody gets the treatment. Just passed the Elizabeth Dole Act, something we're going to have to look at next, and I'm looking forward to.

But as we look at this, I do bring one thing. It's going to require your help. It's going to require our mission. I bring to you today two things that will be at the forefront of my service. These are my dog tags. They are a reminder, just like every other veteran who served, that we're part of a bigger unit. And I also bring this bracelet that was made for me by a young airman. She was keeping watch each night, and I'd go by and see her, and we'd talk.

I was a flat line chaplain at Balad, and she had said one night, she said, "I've got something for you." And she ran back into her guard shack and she came out with this. She said, "You're always bringing us something and listening." She said, "I want to give you something." Well, what she didn't know is, now, about 15 years later, if confirmed by this body, this bracelet will be sitting in the Secretary of the VA's office reminding me every day of the men and women that we serve.

And with that, Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Collins appears on page 61 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Congressman Collins, thank you for your testimony. We'll have a round of questions. I'll start and then ask a couple of questions, and then yield to the Ranking Member.

It would be unexpected if I didn't open my questioning of you in regard to the MISSION Act. I was involved in the creation of the CHOICE Act. We then attempted to improve it, make it more certain with the MISSION Act. And my views are highly framed by my days as a Member of the House of Representatives, in which

I represented a congressional district, the size of the State of Illinois with no VA hospital. So, I care about rural and the distance that those rural veterans face.

So, I want to ask, if confirmed, will you make certain that the letter and spirit of the MISSION Act is followed by every employee in every VA facility, and that the veterans are aware of their rights to advocate for themselves and to receive care when they need it, where they want it?

Mr. COLLINS. Mr. Chairman, as we spoke in your office, there's no greater asset, and really, you've hit at the very issue of why the VA exists. The VA does not exist in and of itself, it exists for the veteran. It exists, and that is why over the past 10 to 15 years in this body, the MISSION Act was passed. And the intent of that was to make sure that in the delivery of services to the veteran is first and foremost.

And look, you have veteran services that are being delivered in our VA system as it has existed. We also, as you've mentioned, Mr. Chairman, there are VA benefits that are doing through our caregiver and our community care program. At the end of the day, the veteran is getting taken care of. VA care is going to happen. VA care will be there. They'll always be the VA healthcare system for the veteran.

But the way that we express that is just like we do in this body. There's different expressions on how we make it better. We don't do the same things 40 years ago that we still do today if we're still wanting to stay current with what's going on. And our newer veterans deserve every access to finding care where they can. Or in your case, if they have a long way to go, they need to find the care if they want to. But always have the VA as a backup.

For me, the intent of the MISSION Act, at the end of the day, was about how do we make veteran care available to the veteran who needs it and not have the battles over how they get it, because they want to be able to have that choice. We're going to continue to do that and following the intent of the Congress, in which I passed, that was my intent as well.

Chairman MORAN. And Representative, is that a commitment in answer to what I asked you?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, it is. We're going to be following the MISSION Act, we're going to have the intent. We're going to follow that up, and it's going to be day one. Understanding that that's why we're there and that nothing's going to hold that up.

Chairman MORAN. And let me highlight, that while I mentioned geography and the distance, there's lots of other concerns in veterans accessing care——

Mr. COLLINS. Yes.

Chairman MORAN [continuing]. And I would highlight the importance that the MISSION Act can play with high risk mental health and addiction issues. We do not have enough care in the VA or outside the VA, and we need to make certain that wherever that care comes from, it's available when it's needed. True?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Mr. Chairman, I think that is a key, and you're seeing this all across. And you just hit on something very close to my heart, and that is especially the mental health aspect of this. As you can see, and Jordan and I have talked about this

a lot. Jordan has a physical disability. She can't walk. And people would look at Jordan and they would have immediate sympathy. But if someone was to come in and say, I'm having trouble thinking clearly, or my brain's not working right, we tend to repulse.

I want a condition which the VA and our community caregivers are drawing near because suicide prevention is one of our biggest issues, and we've got to be able to draw the best and brightest. This is an issue healthwide, not just in the VA, but also in our communities as well. So, I want to make sure we're getting the opportunity. So, as you just said, Mr. Chairman, that that member who needs it can find it, and find it quickly and efficiently.

Chairman MORAN. Let me talk about, for a moment, transition to civilian life. One of the most dangerous circumstances in the well-being of a member of our military who is soon to become a veteran, occurs at that point in transition. It is a time in which there is a sense of loss of belonging, of comradery, of mission, of purpose. It is a time in which suicide ideation is more prevalent. And we have a requirement that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense cooperate in a program to properly assist military men and women as they depart active duty.

I want to hear how much you value this process, and in fact, how much you value the requirements. Because the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs have failed to appropriately and adequately implement that caregiving time and to provide the necessary transition support. It is hugely important. It certainly is important to the life of that service member. It's also important to our recruitment and retention of future members of the military. Comments?

Mr. COLLINS. Mr. Chairman, you've hit it perfectly. I mean, this is not just taking care of our military, our veteran coming out from DoD and then transitioning to a VA care as they choose. But it's also, if you go back even further, to me, this is a recruiting issue. This is part of the whole life cycle of a veteran. And if you have good experiences in the DoD, they have bad experiences for some reason in VA, or vice versa, you're having people who serve then telling their children and others, "I don't want you to serve."

This to me, is the all-encompassing issue that we've got to work on. And as someone, especially as you talked about earlier, transitioning becomes that time in which for some they don't have that grounding anymore. They need that connection. And we've not done a good job of connecting the dots.

One of the things that should disturb all of us on this in this room today is the 17 number that is often used—17 veterans who die by suicide. And when we understand that, here's what we have found, that over 40 percent of them had never connected with the VA. So, Mr. Chairman, you have my complete assurances that not only are we going to be a priority, it is going to be an extra priority for me because I believe we can use all assets, not just DoD and VA, but state veterans association as well. I'm willing to look at any way we can make the connection to make those transitions as easy as possible.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Collins, thank you. I now recognize Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I know that you are exceedingly generous in allotting time for us to ask questions, but I'm going to try to stay within the five minutes.

Chairman MORAN. Were you suggesting that I did not?

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I would never suggest anything of the sort. I hope we'll have a second round of questions, though?

Chairman MORAN. I anticipate that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Let me start with some easy questions. Congressman Collins, will you commit to respond promptly to any inquiry from Members of this Committee to request information and be fully transparent with this Committee?

Mr. COLLINS. That is my intention. I will do for this Committee, make sure you have every information that you need.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. And will you commit to working with the Veterans Service Organizations and other stakeholders in making decisions at the VA?

Mr. COLLINS. I look forward to working with this Committee and the Members of both House and Senate, and any other organizations out there willing to help us help our veterans.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And including the Office of Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office, and the Office of Special Counsel?

Mr. COLLINS. I think you've laid out the very essence of accountability, not only from this body, but others that actually give us insight into what we're doing and how we're doing it. So, yes, I look forward to those and making sure that we look at those recommendations, we work on them where we can.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Last week, at a hearing of the Homeland Security Committee, I gave Russell Vought, the nominee for OMB Director, the opportunity to renounce a proposal that he made, and it's included in *Project 2025* to impose a means test for VA disability compensation benefits.

I also asked him about his proposal to claw back benefits from service-disabled veterans. He has advocated that anybody with less than a 30 percent disability receive no benefits. He refused to renounce either proposal. I need from you a commitment that you will oppose any such efforts by the administration.

Mr. COLLINS. Well, Senator Blumenthal, I've made a habit up here, being here. I'll never answer for someone else. And the question was asked of him. I will say this, I'm going to—I've not been a part of *Project 2025*, haven't even read it. My issue is, is I'm going to take care of the veterans. That means that we're not going to balance budgets on the back of veterans' benefits. We're not going to do that. We're going to put the veteran first. And for me, that decision comes to the Secretary. That's in our budgetary oversight. That's what I'll be coming to you for.

As we talked about in your office, if there are issues that I need, I'm going to come with you with the issue of the solving. If there's issues that I say that you want to see, but the law doesn't allow it, then I'm going to say here's where we changed the law because that's what we've done before. So, my commitment is to the veteran and making sure that we have our budget and sufficiently fund it so that our veterans receive their benefits.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I'm going to interpret that as a yes?

Mr. COLLINS. Mr. Ranking Member, you interpret it.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. In his first term, President Trump attempted to go down this road by trying to eliminate individual unemployability benefits for retirement age veterans. In my view, a very ill-conceived proposal that was later retracted. And I hope that you will oppose any such proposal during this administration.

Mr. COLLINS. Ranking Member, I'm not familiar with that discussion. What I am familiar with is what President Trump did advocate during the first of his four years. And that was the MISSION Act, the Accountability Act, the things that put veterans first. In fact, his words were, "I want to take care of the veterans."

So, as we look forward to this, I look forward to carrying out his vision of taking care of our veterans. Putting them first, making sure the VA is in a situation where it is actually doing that and having the resources it needs, but also having the efficiencies it needs to make it better. So, I look back to what he's already done, and I know that was putting the veteran first, and I'll be doing the same.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. As you know, for far too long, across administrations of both parties, frankly, the VA major and minor construction projects for hospitals, nursing homes, and other critical infrastructure priorities, these are the nuts and bolts, the facilities depended upon by our veterans for care have been dramatically underfunded. For years, I had to fight for funding to modernize the VA facility in West Haven. Finally, it's underway.

There are thousands of other projects I would bet in every one of my colleagues' districts that need that kind of funding. It's a bipartisan issue that's good for veterans and good for local economies in red states and blue states. And the longer we wait, the more expensive construction becomes.

If confirmed, will you commit to me that you will work with us to make those kinds of investments a priority?

Mr. COLLINS. Mr. Ranking Member, I think what you've just hit is bigger than buildings. It's about the future of the VA. It's about how we actually take care of our veterans. So, when you frame the question is funding these projects, I look at it as, am I funding a project that helps a veteran? And that's going to be in every district, as you just said.

So, yes, I'm looking forward to using the limited dollars that are going to be coming from the Congress and how we spend those to make sure that we're prioritizing those needs in areas such as, you mentioned, you're talking about your home state as well. But these are areas that I'm wanting to look forward to make sure that our construction products not only are done efficiently and on time, and also have the proper oversight that we don't see them drag on for years.

I've heard too many times in many of your offices, and I met with almost 60-plus Senators on both parties. This has been an issue that comes up consistently, that we have to be better stewards of our building projects so that at the end of the day, it's the veteran who gets served.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. I almost gaveled you at the time 43 seconds ago, just to make sure that you know the order of things.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I knew that was coming.

Chairman MORAN. Yes, sir. Senator Sheehy is going to be recognized next. One of our colleagues was kind enough to allow him to go instead because he presides at the Senate at 11 o'clock. Senator Sheehy, welcome to this Committee. Well, thank you for your service to the country, and you're recognized.

HON. TIM SHEEHY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MONTANA

Senator SHEEHY. Thank you, Chairman. Congressman, thank you for being here. Thanks for bringing your family. It's great to see them all here. As we know, the military is a family business. When we leave for months or years on end, it's them that carries the weight.

You know I come from a very large state, not a whole lot of people, and a lot of our veterans have to travel many, many hours to get to VA care. And to that end, I'd be curious to hear your thoughts on how we are going to actually expand access to community care. Because as Senator Blumenthal and others discussed, it's been press released, it's been talked about, but I think we know from experience, it's actually been very, very hard for our veterans to effectively mesh their veterans' healthcare benefits with being able to seamlessly go to the community and get their care.

If you're from Plentywood, Montana, it can be a five-and-a-half-hour drive to a VA care facility. So, I want to make sure that we actually take action to ensure that veterans can go into the community and get care they need so they don't have to drive many, many hours away.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I thank you and welcome to the Senate. It's good to see you this morning. I may be from North Georgia, but issues of ruralness is not new to my district. I have the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. In fact, I start and Senator King's, it ends. So, the Appalachian Trail.

So, I get the fact that sometimes the distance may be deceiving, even if it's shorter distance, how to get there. And that could be a problem for veterans, especially older veterans. I remember a time in which I had a 90-year-old veteran trying to—they were asking him to drive 90 miles to get corrective lenses, and he was having trouble seeing. Not the best position we need to be in.

The intent, and I was here for the MISSION Act. In fact, I'm going to go a step beyond Senator Johnny Isakson was a dear friend of mine, and we got first involved in this. He was a mentor of the CHOICE Act, which became the MISSION Act as we're moving forward, because we saw these very issues that you'd speak of.

For me, it's about making sure that we publicize what is out there. I know that's been a concern for many on both sides of the aisle, is making sure veterans understand the benefits that they have. You and I both know in rural areas, sometimes it's hard to get there. I'm committed to making sure we're using every avenue we can to make sure the benefits that they know about, if they want to use them, great, they'll be there for them. But some do not

know. So, for you and other states and rural states and even urban settings, we've got to make sure that the access is there.

In saying that, it also needs to make sure that the VA itself is not standing in the way that where there is conditions met, whether the precondition met, and they are eligible for community care, it's not the VA that's standing in the way to getting them that healthcare they need. And that could come through call centers, doctor visits, pre-clearance, and everything else. So, we're going to be working with that.

Senator SHEEHY. Great. And then as a wounded vet who transitioned out, my wife was also active duty, we served together at the same time. The hardest part about VA care I found, and most of my peers from the GWOT generation, I think agree is, is the handoff from active-duty healthcare the handoff to the VA. I was fortunate enough, I had a fantastic handoff. Disabled American Veterans helped with my transition, but very, very few veterans end up in that spot. How can you, as the VA Secretary, ensure that we have a smoother and seamless handoff from active-duty members so when they enter the VA, medical records reported over, care is ported over, and it happens seamlessly for the veteran.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, as we just discussed it was previously discussing this and that transition with the Chairman and all it, it's a very it's the most important for the family itself. I think you understand that with your transition, your wife's transition. Because at that point, there's that unsettledness; where do we go? How do we get care if we need care? Especially, if there's a preexisting or something that's been treated in DoD. How do we get by?

There are several things that we need to make sure that our touches are much better. There's been some programs to make sure that we touch the VA, touches on occasions, making sure they get the transition care. If that's not happening, we need to do it better.

But there is an issue that we've not discussed yet. I'm sure it's going to come up many more times, and that's the medical health records issue of the VA. That is a program now that has went too many years and cost too many billions of dollars without finding a solution. And my commitment is one of the very first priorities of this, if confirmed, is to get in and figure out why, and put this on a bigger timeframe to get this medical health records issue solved.

I've said this, I'll say this now, and I'll probably say it again. The VA is special, but it's not unique. And hear me when I say that. It's special in who we keep, and who we trust, and who we take care of, and that is our veteran. But it's not unique in the sense that we do healthcare. Healthcare is done in this country every day outside the VA, as well as the largest system, which is the VA.

We've got to get our health records straight so that we can have an easy handoff. What should be a simple click of the button is many times taken—I've had in my office when I was in Congress up to almost a year to get those records transferred. That leaves uncertainty for the veteran, that leaves uncertainty for the family, and makes a very unhealthy experience for those that are serving.

Senator SHEEHY. Well, thank you, Congressman. Thanks for your service to the country in the war. Thanks for your family's service, and thanks for stepping up to serve again.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Murray.

HON. PATTY MURRAY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM WASHINGTON

Senator MURRAY. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Congressman, very good to see you here. Thank you for meeting with me in my office. I appreciated that discussion.

And I'm going to start with the question in reference to what you just talked about because back in 2018, under President Trump's first administration, the VA in Cerner, which is now Oracle Cerner, signed a no bid contract to roll out the Cerner Electronic Health Record to all VA facilities. And the first site went live in my home state in 2020, and it was disastrous. VA and Oracle endangered patients by rushing the deployment, not making sure the system was technically sound, not working with the clinicians on the ground and not providing sufficient training. And veterans and providers in my home state are still paying the price for that.

Last month, VA announced that it would be moving forward with pre-deployment activities at the next four sites for the Electronic Health Record. You said, you referenced it here, that you plan to make EHR a priority. I want to know what specifically that means. Are you going to prioritize it by rushing the implementation, or are you going to prioritize it by getting this system right and focusing on veteran safety and clinical productivity as you move forward?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. Indeed, I did enjoy our time together in your office. There's the old saying that there's never a more perilous issue than to be on the tip of a new idea. And I think it goes back a long way. And that's very true what happens here.

When I say that we're going to make this a priority, it means that we're going to see—for me, it's going to be taking it as a full, all right, I'm taking the first step and I'm going to look at it from fresh eyes. I've not been there for what even this Committee would have to say, it has been too long and cost too much money. We're going to talk about the vendor from Oracle. We're going to make sure that we're finding out what's their issue. We're going to listen to our clinicians. We're going to listen to our hospitals.

And as I said just a few minutes ago, we're special in who we care for, but we're not unique. There's no reason in the world we cannot get this done. And I think that's the concern that I have because this body, and you in particular, have done such a great job with the appropriations process of making sure that we're funding a system that we're now sitting here six to eight years away and nothing's happened.

And that causes, just as the Senator was talking about, not only the transition, but it affects the patients internally. We've got to get better health records so that we cannot only have the issue with our one-on-one doctor interaction, we can move faster, they can see the information ahead, and it's safer for the patient.

So, for me, as soon as possible in the very early stages, if confirmed, I'm going to gather together members of my staff that will be specifically tasked to, as soon as possible within the first days of this administration, see what is the issue, why is it waiting, and why did the previous administration who just left say that they may try to start it back in '26.

I'm not sure why a year would take here. I believe that we can do it and do it properly, not rushed. There's enough information there that I believe we can actually get it done quicker. But it's going to take looking at it.

Senator MURRAY. So, the first step would be to bring Oracle Cerner in along with your staff. Please make sure that you talk with those people on the ground that have been dealing with this to understand what has gone wrong, why it's been such a problem as you take on those next steps. And I would also ask that you please stay in touch with me. This has been a—this Committee knows my top priority, and I have just been so frustrated with it. So, I want to stay in touch with you.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, you would be amazed at how many conversations I've had and we've had as well with this. We can't overemphasize enough of why it needs to get done. But being on the Hill in positions like you are, it's also an understanding that this has become too normal for projects that come out of the Hill—too normal, that we appropriate billions of dollars and yet see no results in six to eight years.

I think President Trump and the administration, when he started this, had the right idea. And we're going to continue that. So, we're going to have to work together. At this point, the finger pointing is done. It's time to get it done for one reason and one reason only. As I said earlier, the mission is the vet. It's the veteran who has earned the benefit. And if we're not giving the right tools for that, then the doctor, the clinician, the nurses are not able to mesh.

And I will not accept, "We can't do it." I will not accept, "I don't know." I will not accept, "We don't have enough money. We don't have time." You've had eight years and billions of dollars. So, I'm with you on this. We'll definitely work together.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Thank you. And quickly, in my last 30 seconds, reference something that Senator Blumenthal mentioned in his opening remarks. And that is, I care deeply about our women veterans and that they have the services they need. So, I want to just ask you, do you believe a veteran who lives in Texas, who has been raped and becomes pregnant, should be able to get abortion care at her local VA?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, that is an issue that is very sensitive in this body. It is something that has been looked at. Here's what the law actually says in the original law from 1992, says the VA does not do abortions. Two years ago, that was a decision that was looked at and decided. I will tell you this, we will be looking at that issue when I get in there to confirm that the VA is actually following the law.

Senator MURRAY. So, do you plan to modify that law then?

Mr. COLLINS. I'll repeat just what I just said. When we get in, we're going to look and make sure that the law is being followed from the 1992 law where it said they couldn't and the revision that just happened.

Senator MURRAY. Okay. Well, I want you to know that I'll be following this very closely. I want to make sure that women veterans get the healthcare they need.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Senator MURRAY. Thank you.
Chairman MORAN. Senator Sullivan is recognized.

HON. DAN SULLIVAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALASKA

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And congratulations to you and the Ranking Member on your new positions. Looking forward to working with you. And Congressman Collins, congratulations to you. Thank you to your wonderful, beautiful family there behind you. It's great that you're doing this.

I certainly agree with my good friend Kevin Cramer, in his opening remarks. I think you are imminently qualified, imminently qualified as a veteran yourself and as a chaplain. I agree with Senator Cramer. That brings some real unique insights. I think that's going to be great. And I look forward to strongly supporting your confirmation. I'm a big fan, and I certainly hope that we have bipartisan support for your confirmation while given your qualifications. So, thanks for your willingness to serve.

I appreciate our meeting. As you know, I focused a lot on Alaska, for really important reasons. My state has more veterans per capita than any state in the country. So, a real patriotic place, way up north. And we're big talking about big states. I won't even get into the size of Alaska because I don't want to embarrass anybody. But it's really, really, really, really big. You know, Tim Sheehy, I think we're five or six times bigger than Montana, and we don't have one full-service veteran hospital. Not one. It's us and New Hampshire. That's it.

So, we have really big challenges. For all those reasons, good, because we have so many veterans challenging because we're big and we don't even have one full-service hospital. So, we've had many disasters, in my view, with the VA. You and I talked about some of them.

In 2015, right, when I came to the Senate, the VA system in Alaska collapsed. That was the first big thing I dealt with as a brand-new Senator. It collapsed because they realigned these VISNs. They took the VISNs in Alaska, and the call center in Alaska, out of Alaska. And we had people making appointments for Alaska veterans based in the Lower 48 who didn't have a clue about our state. The system collapsed. We had a giant backlog. And last year, believe it or not, the backlog was up to 12,000 veterans, which is a lot for my state because we still have call centers based in the Lower 48.

So, a veteran in, let's say, Ketchikan, Alaska, says, "Hey, I need to get to the Anchorage Hospital." The call center will say, "Okay, drive to—well wait, it's an island." They don't even know Ketchikan's an island. So, I need to get a commitment from you in the MISSION Act. I was able to get legislation that said, if you don't have a full-service hospital, and by the way, again, only us and New Hampshire, then you can go immediately to community care.

Why wouldn't you? The call centers don't allow that. Because they don't know about Alaska, they don't know the bill, they don't know the law. So, it's still kind of a disaster for my veterans. So, can I get your commitment to work with me on all the Alaska chal-

lenges, but this call center issue in bringing—we need a call center back in my state for people who understand what the state's all about and to help bring down this very big backlog.

So, can I get your commitment on that, Congressman, to help our veterans, and of course, to get your commitment, come up to Alaska, you bring the whole family, come in the summer if you want. We can go fishing after, or come in the winter maybe see what it's like to be in a state that's dark and 50 below zero. So, either way, your choice. People pick August as opposed to February.

Mr. COLLINS. I appreciate it. You make it sound so much more attractive there. The last part as an Air Force chaplain, actually puts our chaplains up in your beautiful state. That is one of our issues, though, is that long winter.

Look, you brought out a point when you were talking about this in the uniqueness of Alaska, and New Hampshire, and not having the full-service hospitals. So, they do go to—you know, it's very much of a user of community care. It is really disturbing to me.

As we talked about, you had about 5,000, I believe it was last time we had talked——

Senator SULLIVAN. Yes.

Mr. COLLINS [continuing]. Of veterans waiting for health benefits. This is not a benefit backlog. This is a healthcare backlog. That means there's 5,000 souls that are there not getting the healthcare.

Senator SULLIVAN. By the way, last summer was up to 12,000. I think the outgoing Secretary was trying. But 12,000 just waiting to get an appointment because we got someone in the Lower 48 who's never been to Alaska trying to make an appointment for an Alaska veteran. It's a disaster.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, no, I agree. It's something when you told me that, it surprised me, and it's something we got to look at. Sometimes things get lost in bureaucracy and you think it looks good, but then after their actual real-world application, you have to go back and make changes. I'm willing to commit to you to look at that and see if we can make it better so that they understand that Ketchikan's an island and they can't drive to Anchorage.

Senator SULLIVAN. Let me ask one final question very quickly. We talked about it. Our Alaska Native community is also incredibly patriotic. Alaska Natives serve at higher rates in the military than any other ethnic group in the country. So, super patriotic. Live in a lot of our rural communities, and our Alaska Native healthcare organizations have reached into the rural parts of the state that, you know, no other place does.

The VA has a long history of working with our Alaska Native health organizations to extend the reach of care into very rural parts of America, very rural parts of Alaska, and partner to get Alaska Native veterans, but also non-Natives who live in these rural communities to go to an Alaska Native health organization to get care because they've partnered with the VA.

Can I get your commitment to continue that good relationship? Sometimes it's a little contentious on, you know, negotiating the agreements, but they're really worth it, to expand and extend VA healthcare for Native Alaskans, non-Native Alaskans in the most rural parts of our state?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, yes, we're willing to commit to do that, also in any other district across this country where we can partner to make sure our veterans are getting healthcare that they need. And especially, in a unique situation like that, of course.

Senator SULLIVAN. Great. Thank you. Thank you, Congressman. I look forward to supporting you, and I'll have more questions for the record. Thank you very much.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hirono.

HON. MAZIE K. HIRONO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's nice to see you. Congratulations on your nomination.

As part of my responsibilities to ensure the fitness of any nominee who comes before any of my committees, I ask the following two initial questions. Since you became a legal adult, have you ever made unwanted request for sexual favors, or committed any verbal or physical harassment or assault of a sexual nature?

Mr. COLLINS. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. Have you ever faced discipline or entered a settlement related to this kind of conduct?

Mr. COLLINS. No, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. I would just like to note that how Hawaii also does not have a full-service VA hospital, and like Alaska, has access issues with seven inhabited islands and veterans living on all of them. So, those are all issues that we're going to need to continue to address. Congressman, you are very close to President Trump, both as a Member of the House and since that time. Under what circumstances, would you say no to a request or order from President Trump?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, we're dealing in hypotheticals of saying, this President would actually ask me to do something illegal. I'm not going to a hypothetical because this President has put veterans first. He's not going to ask me to do anything illegal or outside the current law. And I think the question implies something that's not happened, and——

Senator HIRONO. I think we need to——

Mr. COLLINS [continuing]. I don't need to worry about a hypothetical.

Senator HIRONO. Excuse me. I think we need to make sure where, what your priorities are and you are saying that you will not say yes to what you consider an illegal order.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator——

Senator HIRONO. Next question. During your time in public life, you have been very outspoken against pregnant people's right to their own reproductive choices. In the role of Secretary, you would be overseeing care for veterans and their loved ones across the entire ideological spectrum. Would you rescind the interim final rule enacted under the Biden's administration that allows VA to provide abortion counseling and abortions in the case of rape, incest, or where the life or health of the veteran would be endangered?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. As we just discussed this just a moment ago, the VA Act in 1992, specifically forbid the VA from doing abortions. I plan on——

Senator HIRONO. Well, you do—excuse me.

Mr. COLLINS. I plan on——

Senator HIRONO. Let me just clarify something for you.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I'll be happy to answer your question——

Senator HIRONO. You refer to a law that actually is being pretty much clarified by this interim final rule. And there is, as you know, debate regarding what the law allows. I believe the law allows this rule to be enacted. And my question to you is whether you would rescind this interim rule that would allow the providing of abortions——

Mr. COLLINS. And Senator——

Senator HIRONO [continuing]. To veterans who under the circumstances of rape, incest, or where her life is endangered, would you rescind the rule?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, as I was answering your question, we will look at this rule and see if it complies with the law. As you just said in your own answer, it is a debatable issue. We're going to look at it and make sure that the VA is following the law.

Senator HIRONO. Well, of course, if you provide these kinds of services, you are providing all the veterans the full range of care for reproductive services as needed, regardless of your ideological position.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, my ideological position is based in the law, and I will follow the law in this regard. And if your questions, as I would have loved to have sat down and talked with you before this hearing, and we could have explained this because I believe the law is clear.

Senator HIRONO. I'm asking you under oath. Do you believe that world class care quoting you, "includes a full range of reproductive services?"

Mr. COLLINS. I believe that the range of care provided at the VA is following the law and the intent of this body as it is set forth in the law.

Senator HIRONO. And if the way you interpret the law will disallow services to 2 million women veterans in the U.S. including 13,000 in Hawaii, you would do so?

Mr. COLLINS. As I have just——

Senator HIRONO. That's what you just testified.

Mr. COLLINS. As I have just testified and in looking at this, I will take a look at where the law stands. And as you also testified—in your questioning, you said it is a debatable and that was just changed two years ago——

Senator HIRONO. Well, I certainly hope that——

Mr. COLLINS [continuing]. And we'll look at——

Senator HIRONO [continuing]. Interpret the—there is a rule that actually interprets the law——

Mr. COLLINS. I understand the rule.

Senator HIRONO [continuing]. A particular way and you're saying that it all depends?

Mr. COLLINS. I understand the rule.

Senator HIRONO. VS has over—and you're not responding to whether or not you will rescind that rule, which provides care for thousands of female veterans. VA has over 450,000 employees and contracts with hundreds of thousands of private providers across

the country. Can you explain what roles you have held that would have prepared you for leading such a large organization?

Mr. COLLINS. I'd love to, Senator. I have been a part of this body in which I have actually overseen the—and working through votes and working through bills that actually affect the VA's operation from a day-to-day operation. I understand the policy of the VA intimately by being a Member just like you.

I've also spent time in the military working with many individuals and currently serve at the Warner Robins Air Force Base Reserve Command of our chaplain's office with over 656 personnel working across different manage comms, handling personnel decisions.

I've also been a leader in many other ways, and I believe that leadership is how you deal with this. You deal with leadership in putting good people in good positions to make sure that you have a workforce that knows that they have it.

Senator HIRONO. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Senator Cramer.

HON. KEVIN CRAMER,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH DAKOTA

Senator CRAMER. I'm just compelled to ask this question because Senator Hirono asked you if you would—I think the implication was would you carry out an order, an illegal order by the President of the United States? Which there's no evidence he'd ever do and he's ever done. And that's why I'm—it's so hypothetical to be silly.

But I am compelled to ask, would you consider rescinding an illegal rule by the previous administration? Because it seems to me that an illegal rule, or at least one that's debatable, is worthy of significant legal consideration before you would do it just because you felt like doing it?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator Cramer, I appreciate the way that is worded because that is exactly the way I tried to word it to the Senator. And that is if the law is specifically stated that the VA was not to be doing abortions, there are other areas there that we look at. So, we look at a situation that came up in 2022 in which they were told to look at a rule that would get around that. To me, it's time for us to take a look at that rule and make sure, just as in every other area of VA life, that we're actually doing what the law and the intent of this body is.

That's not, when you get into that, for me, this is going forward and looking at all the issues. If it was just to a matter of—and I have great respect for this body, best served in this body. And what we pass actually means something. And the minute it becomes something, it doesn't mean something in the administration or outside is the minute the rule of law falls down.

So, for me, yes, I will be looking into this. Yes, I'll be confirming that it's comports with the law as it is.

Senator CRAMER. Thank you. I wanted to give you that opportunity——

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you.

Senator CRAMER [continuing]. To, uninterrupted, explain yourself, and you did it very well.

You're hearing a lot about community care, obviously. And I will spare you all my horror stories. I think Senator Sheehy did a remarkable job, as did Senator Sullivan, because those are big rural states. Obviously, your examples are outstanding. I would just add that it's my intention to work with my colleagues to further clarify in the MISSION Act what access to community care is.

In other words, we still hear horror stories from veterans who live 300 miles from the VA hospital in Fargo, or maybe 100 miles from the nearest, even CBOC, who maybe live across the street from a critical access hospital, which we have 36 spread throughout our wonderful little state, 36 critical access hospitals who operate on the thinnest of margins.

And it's tragic for me to think that there's a veteran waiting for paperwork that's being slow-walked by a bureaucrat more interested in the VA than they are the veteran, and all while there's a hospital that's barely hanging on across the street. And I'm not even exaggerating a little bit when I say that.

And, perhaps, I guess my question is, would you work with me and colleagues on this Committee to find ways to not just streamline the process, but to guarantee it? In other words, the default is not, have you checked all the boxes on enough pieces of paper to qualify for care somewhere else before you die trying to get far, far away. But rather you do that first and then the reimbursement comes after that. And so, anyway, I'm just asking if you'd help me if you've got some thoughts, and if you'd commit to working with us on something like that?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, you've hit the whole heart of why I want to do this job. I've been asked by doing this job, why do I want to go into the VA? And it's sort of been interesting. I've had some say congratulations. I've had some say, oh, what are you doing? It's a large undertaking. And I said, no, I'm taking this, number one, because I care for people, and I care for veterans. It's where I come from. It's what I believe. It's what I saw from up here. It's what you see as you look at to make it better. For me, the service organization called the VA is about service.

It's about the veteran, as you just stated. It's not about the VA. The VA is there. And like I said, I'm looking forward to being a Secretary who motivates and unleashes the power of this wonderful workforce, which I believe most are wonderful workforce that we have that want to do a good job.

Senator CRAMER. Absolutely.

Mr. COLLINS. They need the leadership and encouragement to say, let's find yeses instead of nos. Let's find answers instead of technicalities. Let's find the hope in people instead of trying to find the reason to hold or delay. To me, this is about the veteran. This is about getting them the access to care that you, and I, and many on this Committee voted for. That's why we do what we do, is because they deserve it.

So, for me, and Senator Duckworth—and this crosses party lines, and I appreciate the Ranking Member talking about bipartisanship. We had a great conversation in her office discussing how we could look collocate CBOCs with rural hospitals. If that's a possibility, could it be looked at? I committed to the Senator from Illinois that's something I would look at because it helps both sides.

And so, we've got to get back to the fact where it's about the veteran itself. And I'm going to want to empower a workforce that wants to get up every day and come to and say, yes, I'm getting to this veteran so they get the help they need.

Senator CRAMER. You, sir, are a leader with a servant's heart. Thank you. I yield.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Cramer. Senator King.

HON. ANGUS S. KING, JR.,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MAINE

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your assumption of the chairmanship of the Committee and the Ranking Member.

I want to just emphasize a couple of points you've already discussed. One is transition with the Chairman—critically important. And there are a number of bills out there that TAP Promotion Act, Welcome Home Veterans Act, Combat Veterans Pre-Enrollment Act. I suspect you're familiar with them, but I just want to hear you reiterate your commitment to this transition and working with the Department of Defense, because it's a partnership that has to happen to make that warm handoff. Is that going to be a priority for you?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Senator. You couldn't have a—there are so many priorities in life that you look at, you want to get started. But this one that you hit about making this transition is so important to me because it transcends just getting them into the service. It transcends that benefit that they've earned. It goes to the very heart of making sure that they're taken care of and feeling wanted.

As we stated a little while back, I believe it starts at a recruitment issue all the way through a retirement issue. Because if they feel like they're taken care of in DoD, then they're going to have a better opportunity if VA reaches out with a hand to say, here's the benefits you want to participate in, that they have a place there, and they have a facility for them.

The concern I have, Senator, is making sure that in DoD, and I've already had some look at this as how we can do some cooperative work with the DoD and the VA. Also bringing into account the State Veterans Associations as well.

Senator KING. I want to emphasize that last point. I had a proposal in the National Defense Authorization Act, got in the Senate, got knocked out in the House—to communicate a veteran's transition status to the state veterans' facility so this person can be greeted at the airport, for example. That's the kind of handoff that I think we want. Do you agree?

Mr. COLLINS. I agree. Look, because it's exactly what you said, it's how you're perceived. I view the service part of the VA as this most important part. There are some times that you have to tell somebody no, there's sometimes you have to tell them we can't do something in a benefit, or something else. But there's always time to make that veteran feel like they are cared for.

And I think the transition time, which you're talking about right now, that sort of, as you said, that warm hug is the thing that we need to actually look at.

Senator KING. And it's a critical moment, as you pointed out. It's a time of heightened risk of suicide, for example.

Let me move on. Electronic Health Records, you had some discussions. I think this points out one of the fundamental flaws in the Federal Government procurement process, particularly in national security areas where we feel we've got to buy our own custom brand-new shiny product rather than something that's sitting on the shelf.

There's an Electronic Health Records system called Epic that thousands of hospitals use all across the country. Instead, we're trying to invent our own system, which frankly hasn't worked, and as you pointed out, has cost billions of dollars. I hope that you'll look at the option of saying, hey, let's go with something that works, that we know it works, and can be modified to meet our needs, rather than continuing down the roll of billions of dollars of a system that has so far not proven itself.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes. Senator, I think what you've just hit is—what I'm committed to is making sure what we have and looking at all options on the table. I want to bring in. Because Cerner and others have—you know, Oracle has had places where they already have facilities already running the program.

It's the issue that I went back to earlier, and I think you heard, it was here, that the VA is special, but not unique. We've got to get out of this uniqueness status and how is it different than the largest healthcare organization like this. That there are not better ways that we can do it? And it's not just in medical health records. We've got to look for better ways all across.

Senator KING. That's exactly my point. A lot of discussion this morning about the MISSION Act and community care. I'm all for it under the appropriate circumstances, but not at the expense of a creeping elimination of the veteran's healthcare system. I believe I heard you say earlier, you remain committed to VA healthcare in addition to community care where appropriate. Is that correct?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, you've heard correctly because I believe that when there'll always be a VA healthcare for the veteran who comes out. I believe what we have to do is make sure that we are adapting and making sure that we are giving the care as authorized by this body to make sure that we do it in the ways that are appropriate to the veteran. It's no longer time in a situation especially in different parts of the country where we have to have the veterans to do the mission and what the intent was when we passed it.

Senator KING. You've mentioned that you had not read *Project 2025*. Are you familiar with it? There are some suggestions in it that, frankly, I find pretty frightening.

Mr. COLLINS. I'm not, except for what I've heard when Senators mention or somebody says it on TV.

Senator KING. Well, for example, there's a provision that new managerial approaches should be currently used in the private sector to be employed to improve the existing VBA activities. I'm afraid that might be code for loan sharks, for claim sharks. Are you supportive of the GUARD VA Benefits Act? Are you familiar with that bill?

Mr. COLLINS. I'm vaguely familiar with it, yes. I haven't touched that.

Senator KING. Well, I hope you'll familiarize yourself with it. I think it's a very important bipartisan bill to protect veterans from what are colloquially referred to as claim sharks. I'll have some other additional questions later in the hearing. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. You're welcome, Senator King. Senator Banks, welcome to the Committee, and you're recognized for questioning.

HON. JIM BANKS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM INDIANA

Senator BANKS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Collins, great to see you. We served together in the House, and those four years of President Trump's first term were four great years for America's veterans. President Trump was the veterans' President.

We did great things from; expanding the MISSION Act, to greater accountability for VA employees, we loosened standards for the GI Bill, President Trump sent us down a path to modernize Electronic Health Records. The list goes on and on from the VA crisis hotline to other issues that were priorities for him that you and I had a chance to work on in the House is among the greatest accomplishments in the eight years that I've served in Congress.

Now we have another four years. And you're going to be a great Secretary, working with a great President, and I can't wait to work with you to do even greater things for America's heroes. I do have some concerns about the condition of our medical facilities. And you and I talked about this in my office.

The Indianapolis Medical Center is due for a total replacement. It's in the VA's five-year development plan meeting. It's a project that you have on the books, but you don't have funding to do it. Will you commit today to working with me to get that project started next year as the VA plans call for?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator—and is working with this body to get the funding needs for all of our construction and priority needs are going to be there. One of the issues that we have, and if you allow me to spend off of that, because you haven't experienced it, is our average age of many of our facilities, especially our hospital, is 60-plus years old. This is beyond when you look at the hospital side now in private hospitals and public hospitals, the average 15 to 20 years. It's just a whole difference, which throws in so many different problems.

So, construction is going to be something, and the projects like that are going to be important. But also, as we just discussed, and Senator King brought up the Electronic Healthcare Record system, some of our existing facilities that we're not going to redo are going to have to have major work just to hold the computer systems and others to make that happen.

So, it's something we're going to work toward to make sure that we get it funded. We look forward to working with this body to get the money for that and would support working through that.

Senator BANKS. Yes. Thank you for that. I look forward to working with you on that. The VA, as you know, has struggled with con-

struction maintenance and leasing for years. And Indianapolis and a lot of other projects around the country are facing significant delays, which is harming our veterans. How are you going to prioritize reforming the offices that handle these functions within the VA?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I think what we'd looking at here, and we really got to go, is making sure that we have a—what I'm hoping to find is a more, I won't say slim-down, but a very focused vision on our acquisitions, our construction projects, so that we're not going through multiple layers that, as you well know, add time if this person has to sign off. But making it applicable.

This body's already said that projects over $100 million have to go with the Corps of Engineers. We have those other issues now after the project in Aurora and then Colorado, which went so far, which we were here for. That's why we've got to make sure that we have the right people in those positions and bring in help when we need to, to say, okay, how can this project be built more cost effectively?

And if I could say one thing. One of the reasons, yes, I looked at this job and looked at the masses of it, but wanted to do it, was those four years that you just mentioned. Because I knew that President Donald Trump actually wanted to take care of veterans, and didn't say it, but actually showed it and what we did, and we worked on here in the Hill.

Senator BANKS. I would add to that, the last four years have been very different. Hasn't been a priority of the administration that you're following, and look forward to changing that very quickly.

When I served on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, there was a lot of confusion about where the VA was going to put new clinics and why those counties, or towns, or cities were chosen. And it made it really hard for me as a Congressman to explain to my constituents why this town was chosen for this clinic and another location wasn't.

Do you think the VA should let Congress know in advance where planned clinics are going, not just send us a letter when a lease gets awarded?

Mr. COLLINS. I believe that we should have a much better working relationship with Congress and in regards to all aspects of this. And I think that includes CBOCs, and we just discussed in earlier conversation I'd had with Senator Duckworth about how we locate those, maybe even with others.

But if you would allow me just a moment, there's one area that I want to this whole body to hear, and it's one of the main emphasis that I'm going to have, I believe, and after listening to this over, like I said, 60-plus conversations and more, that we have to have a better working relationship with the VA, and the Members of this Committee, and the body through our legislative affairs.

Legislative affairs under my leadership, if confirmed by this body, is going to be proactive, not reactive. They'll still be there for this Committee and the House Committee to answer policy questions and to do those things. But I want to have actually legislative affairs people, boots on the ground, so to speak, here on the Hill,

talking not just to you about your concerns, but hearing from your constituent services workers.

60 percent of most all of your constituent services work fall under VA, whether it's benefits or healthcare. I want our folks to know that upfront so that your people can know who to talk to, but then they will relay the reports to me so that if in Indiana we have a problem that is coming from your office and a couple of the Congressman's office, we're going to have a chance to react to that much quicker. And so, I'll have the information so that we're not seeing something in the paper six months later, or having you to call.

I've made the promise to everyone here that I do not come in this with rose-colored glasses. I think this is a large undertaking that I feel called to be at. But I will say this, for all of you who have it, and I've heard it as well in my eight years in Congress, when a member of the military or veteran has to call our office, a Congressman, or a Senator's office to get the care they've already earned, it is a mark of failure in our department.

It's not something we can't overcome, and there's plenty of things to do it. But I believe until we get to that mark, the VA does itself, then we're not taking care of our veterans as fully as we can. And I'm going to encourage all of our employees to get to that standard. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. I better check and make sure I've got it right. Senator Banks, thank you for your questions. Senator Slotkin.

HON. ELISSA SLOTKIN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM MICHIGAN

Senator SLOTKIN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And I'm really pleased to be on this Committee. And I think that veterans' issues should be bipartisan issues. You and I served together in the House, we overlapped. I'm very proud to be the first CIA officer in the U.S. Senate. I'm a 9/11 baby, as they say, and was recruited by the CIA after 9/11, and did three tours in Iraq, armed alongside the military, and worked proudly for both Democrat and Republican administrations. I'm also a Democrat that just got elected on the same ballot as Donald Trump, as we talked about. So, I certainly understand that Mr. Trump has the right to nominate his own people and have policies that differ than my own beliefs.

I think what I care about the most is just making sure that our veterans get the care that they need and we don't strip essential programs for the sake of cutting the workforce. We talked about the PACT Act when you were in my office. I worked very hard on that bill on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, you know, the potential to expand care to 3,000,000 9/11-era veterans who lived near burn pits. And then the Elizabeth Dole Act that a number of folks in this Committee worked on as well, which really does amazing things from mental health and expanding programs on long-term care.

So, can you just give me assurances that, while I know it's a mandate from President Trump to cut the size of the government, that you will always speak up on behalf of veterans, not just do the bidding of someone who maybe somewhere else sees your numbers and starts to slash and burn. Because in places like Michigan, we

have really expanded our staff on the VA to handle the additional veterans coming in. If we just start slashing numbers, we're going to be hurting the veterans who we just all voted and said we wanted to care for. So, just a simple answer there.

Mr. COLLINS. That's an easy one, because what I was told by the President is to take care of our veterans, and we're going to take care of our veterans. And I said earlier in this hearing, that we're not going to sacrifice the veteran's benefits to do a budget. And I think these are the consequences we have.

Efficiencies can be found everywhere, as you and I talked about in the office. But we've also got to make sure we're doing our mission. I wouldn't go to a place in which we're not doing the mission. The mission is the veterans.

Senator SLOTKIN. I know there will come a time, there always is, when we're cutting things that you will have to push back and say, this is what that's going to do to care. You're going to pledge an oath to the Constitution here soon, not to any one President.

On the issue of veterans' benefits, do you believe that you have the ability to change someone—you as VA Secretary, if confirmed, would have the ability to change the discharge status of any one veteran?

Mr. COLLINS. That's not under my purview to change.

Senator SLOTKIN. Yes. And do you believe that a veteran's benefits can be cut based on personal or political beliefs?

Mr. COLLINS. No, Senator, that is not a criterion for cutting a benefit. A benefit is earned and based on the criteria that is set before. It's not a political belief. There's not a litmus test that we would work there.

Senator SLOTKIN. I really hope we stand for that because even when we deeply disagree, right, with the veterans' actions, their service and their discharge status is determined based on their moment that they serve the country, whether we like their views or not. That's why we never had the veterans' benefits, as I understand it, taken away from people like the January 6th protestors even when they were convicted.

Similarly, we're watching right now, senior people from the U.S. Military and Coast Guard be removed from their jobs on Mr. Trump's first day. I just want your assurances that you are not going to change their veteran benefits that they earned if the discharge status is what it is from the Department of Defense.

Mr. COLLINS. I think encouraging not going down a path that we've talked about are hypotheticals here. I think the DoD when it comes to the veteran and coming to the VA itself, the veteran comes with the benefits that they've earned through their service and how they get to us. We'll take care and make sure that the veteran is taken care of with their status when they get here. The issues you're talking about from DoD, we're going to take care of them from the veteran perspective.

Senator SLOTKIN. Okay. I just think that we go down a dangerous road as a country if we say that a veteran has served. They get their discharge papers, they've done their service of the country, and then regardless of what political views they have, whatever they say or do after their service, they're then retroactively punished through their pension, through their VA benefits.

I think that's a dangerous path for Democrats and Republicans. And I don't want you to be the first VA Secretary to go down that. So, I'll rely on you to stand in the breach on that one. And with that, I yield back my time.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much, Senator Boozman.

HON. JOHN BOOZMAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARKANSAS

Senator BOOZMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations, on the chairmanship. We look forward to working with you and Senator Blumenthal to provide the leadership, and continue to provide great leadership that this Committee's had for the last several years.

The VA's State Veterans Home Program is a great resource for many senior veterans, including those in Arkansas. Our Rogers location does excellent work caring for senior veterans in Arkansas, but needs upgrades to continue providing the standards of care expected.

In fiscal year 2024. This 96-bed facility was ranked number 12 on the Veterans State Home Construction Grant Program priority list after being ranked number 9 in fiscal year 2023. Unfortunately, the facility will not receive the necessary funding in fiscal year 2024. We've worked with the current administration to get the necessary upgrades to Rogers' facility needs. Do I have your commitment that the VA under your leadership will continue working with us on the issue?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, thank you. And I think this is important. This came up with several of us, and you and I have discussed it. We're going to work with you, and the appropriators, and also this Committee, to make sure that the priorities expressed will be taken care of, and we'll work with you to do those as we go forward. Because at the end of the day, especially what you just brought up, is one of the more critical we have. And that's sort of that end-of-life kind of issues that we deal with and those later stages issues when more care is needed.

So, for me, making sure that you have—that the states across this country and the VA is providing that care is something that is, frankly, a non-negotiable. As a pastor, it's been mentioned many times about me being a chaplain, but I was a pastor for 11 years as well, and had spent many times in those long-term care facilities. And it was humbling, and also, though, very critical to understanding.

So, yes, we're going to work to see what we can to make sure that every need is that. We'll not always be able to say, here's the best answer you're going to hear, but I'll definitely work with you.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. Thank you. I'm very proud of the Committee's work to pass the PACT Act, which now provides long overdue care for veterans dealing with the effects of toxic exposure. While the VA's efforts to reach veterans impacted by the legislation and get them support has been great, I remain concerned about the VA's management of the Toxic Exposure Fund and overall budget outlook.

How will you make sure the VA's Toxic Exposure Fund remains viable for years to come while providing the levels of care our veterans have earned?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. The care there is the biggest issue and coming out to the PACT Act in the work we've had. And it's been, you know, several hundred thousand new people have been brought into the system and that even more are coming.

I think the biggest thing we've got to do is actuarially look at what is passed here, and I promise, and I think you and I spoke about this in your office, is are we at the VA making sure that we're getting good information and doing what the intent was so that they can continue to get those benefits. And that comes from these resources that are—it comes from us, from this body.

So, I'm going to be actually looking at it, and I'll come to you with real world examples. One of the things, as I made the comment earlier about our legislative affairs and making sure that we're more on the Hill, so to speak with that, was another commitment that I have because I sat where you have sat and had questions of administrations of the past, is that you get good information.

And you have a commitment from me that when you get information about how we're funding and how we're appropriating, that whoever sits at this table, myself and any other person that comes from the VA, will give you good information, and they'll give you good numbers. So, that we're not like we were last fall when it starts off at a high, at a number of billions, then goes down to another billions, and then was not even used, as Senator Cramer talked about in the opening.

So, we're going to be doing that in addition to making sure that we're getting good, accurate numbers so that we can reflect the intent of these Acts. The Elizabeth Dole Act, that was just mentioned just a few minutes ago, is going to be one that I want to make sure that we do properly. We set it in under the Trump administration when the Blue Water Navy, and others, and MISSION Act was actually put into play.

There were times set in so that it could be done properly. Sometimes the great ideas are at the wrong time are not the best way. You got to make sure that you have the great idea done properly, and that's what we're going to do.

Senator BOOZMAN. Very good. I'll just say, again, you served, you're a great Member in the House. You understand how important it is that when we need information, when we need to talk to you or somebody of importance. It's so frustrating you have a hearing, and you've sent letters, and the last three letters hadn't been answered. I'll just say again very briefly because my time is up, but I think it's one of the most important things that we can talk about today is how important it is to, again, be such that you are in constant tune with the Members.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, thank you for highlighting what I believe is going to be one of the biggest differences, and if confirmed by this body, at the VA in the early stages. And that is going to be the involvement of our legislative affairs on this Hill. I am committed to having 535, if you would, canaries in a coal mine, 100 Senators and 435 Representatives who actually can help us and

work together to see where there's problems, to see where there's issues.

Like I said, not just in policy, not just in funding regulating, but also in the actual veteran constituency. Because when I hear from you, and as Chairman Moran and I talked, and he mentioned earlier, when we hear from the veterans, that's what we hear in Home Depot. That's what we hear in Kroger when we're walking around. Thanks for helping this. I want to know where the problems are because I'm not a Secretary, if confirmed, that will sit behind the desk. I will be out, and I'll be there making sure we get it fixed.

Senator BOOZMAN. Good. Thank you. Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Boozman. Senator Gallego.

HON. RUBEN GALLEGO,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ARIZONA

Senator GALLEGO. Thank you, Chairman. Thank you, Congressman Collins, for joining us here today, and congratulations on your nomination. And as you and I talked in my office, of course, this is very personal to me also being a Marine Iraq veteran, someone who has used VA healthcare services and has also received a disability rating from them, making sure the VA continues to be foremost taking care of our veterans. It's important to me, especially in Arizona.

So, I have a couple questions more Arizona-focused. So, the Be Connected program operated by the Arizona Coalition for Military Families had began as an Arizona veteran suicide prevention program, and has grown to serve the state's veteran population and their families by connecting them with mental health resources and more, which sometimes cannot be met within the hospital system.

It receives one-third of its funding from the State of Arizona and two-thirds from the VA, and renews it's contract with the Phoenix VA annually. The Phoenix VA recently said that it no longer intends to enter into another contract with the Be Connected program, and will stop funding on March 31st due to budget constraints.

So, if confirmed, will you commit to work with me and the other members of the Arizona delegation to ensure the VA finds alternative sources of funding so Arizona veterans can continue to receive these critical services through the Be Connected program?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Senator. I mean, one of the things—it's good to see you, and it's good to see you over here in your seat as we serve together. Look, also touring the same ground in Iraq, we know that that issue coming back, and that transition's been mentioned many times here before. It concerns me, and I'm going to say that what you're bringing up right now, it concerns me that as a VA, that there would be concerns about funding a program that actually goes to what is one of my major concerns, and that is the issue of death by suicide and looking at the—or taking even to a homelessness issue as well.

So, those are the kind of programs I think are priorities. So, from my perspective as a Secretary, it's going to be about priorities. And what we're seeing today, is 17 people not with us anymore. It's not satisfactory. Over 40,000, I believe, in of those are more homeless,

it's not satisfactory. A 5,000-waiting list in Alaska is not satisfactory.

So, budget items will match up to the priorities of what I want to have, and that's what I look forward to working with you on and look forward to getting more information on that issue.

Senator GALLEGO. Thank you. Now, I'm focusing and moving on to kind of the HUD-VASH program. Something that's very important in terms of reducing homeless veterans. But we did see a growth in homeless veterans increase by 7.4 percent from 2022 to 2023, which is for a variety of reasons, not just the HUD-VASH VA program. The program is you'll rent pairs—pairs rental assistance through housing vouchers targeted at veterans, specifically, with case management and other supportive services.

If confirmed, would you do what would you do to support HUD-VASH program, increase the collaboration between the VA and HUD?

Mr. COLLINS. That is something that I think is, you and I talked about in the office, very important because we look at the areas for disability. We look at the VASH, we look at this. Is it actually enough to provide people the resources to have a home?

For me, I'll look at this issue of homelessness, not just as a VA issue. I'm going to look across the spectrum with HUD and with any other department, which we can to make sure that this is something that is not the dark spot on a veteran service where we have homelessness like that is spoken of all the time.

So, I'm willing to take whatever we can in the VA, outside the VA, and I'm looking forward to having a good relationship, if confirmed here and if confirmed, Mr. Turner confirmed, at HUD, that we're going to have a lot of conversations about this.

Senator GALLEGO. Right. And you and I talked about this in my office, too. The studies have shown that the whole health coaching can help veterans make meaningful progress toward health goals, reduce stress, and improve quality of life, and overall, bring down the long-term costs for the VA. Because then, you have healthier veterans at a younger age, means you have healthier veterans at older age.

VA currently employs around 200 full-time health coaches. But there are about approximately 20,000 to 30,000 health and wellness coach encounters where they have 20', 30,000 health and wellness encounters per month. This number is expected to increase as veterans demand more coaching when it comes to life and health.

As we discussed in our meeting, the VA has serious health coach vacancies. If confirmed, what would you do to safely help remove current barriers to healthcare professionals interested in becoming health coaches with the VA?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, as we discussed that, that's one of the issues I see, and I think you and I both saw from the House, and now you over here in the Senate, and myself, is why are regulations keeping us from getting to the help that we need?

And I think that's what I want to take a look at, after you and I conversation, we get confirmed, we're going to look at this and say, why is getting from A to D, why is B and C proper—or could we remove C and just go A, B, D? I think those are the kind of

things because what you just talked about, again, is how do we keep people?

At the bottom line, for me, this chaplain's heart, this Secretary's heart is always going to be about helping the veteran get the help that they need in all areas of their life. And if we don't do that, then we're making a mistake. We're missing the mark. And you and I have seen that, unfortunately, firsthand as someone who's actually counseled with those who thought about taking their life, those who have serious issues. We've got to have every help we can have.

Senator GALLEGO. Okay. Thank you. I yield back.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, and welcome to the Committee. Senator Tuberville.

HON. TOMMY TUBERVILLE,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ALABAMA

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Congressman, for wanting to take this on, you and your family, the largest healthcare system in the world. If that's not eye-opening, I don't know what is. We've had a lot of people tackle this job, and it is a hard job, and it's very, very important. I grew up in a military family, been to many, many VAs, and we have some good ones in Alabama.

But it's amazing to me that we look at this and it's, again, the second largest budget that we have here in Congress. Second largest behind the DoD. But it's really not about money. You know, I think about and look at all this in a different perspective sometimes. It's about people running what you have. And we're run by unions and there's obviously some good and some bad, but we got to find the problem. Because we got to, more and more of our veterans are adding up. We have almost 500,000 just in the State of Alabama alone, and it's a big problem that we can't take care of all of them.

Now, when I first got here and got on this Committee four years ago, one of the first things that we did, President Trump had eliminated 4,000 people. He didn't care what they were in, if they didn't do their job, they got fired. And he took 4,000 of them and sent them out the door. With the Biden administration come in, the first thing they did is they rehired them, and back pay, and put them in a situation where a lot of them had really breached protocol.

Now, I come from a previous profession. If you didn't do right, you were gone. Will you commit to doing what's right for the veteran when it comes to the personnel that are handling these people? We can talk about acts and laws and bills and all this, it isn't going to make a bit of good unless we get the people that's running these VAs and these homes that take care of our veterans, if we don't get the best. Will you commit to that?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, thank you for that. I mean, your last statement is not just your profession, but I think every other profession in the world expects accountability. And I think that's what raises the standard. So, yes, we're going to have accountability. The VA Accountability and Whistleblower Act, which by the way, passed unanimously out of the Senate, it's intent was to make sure

that those workers who were not fulfilling their mission, they were not going to take a job anymore.

I intend to make sure that this is a promise that I have is if there is someone who is harming, or in the way of our veteran and taking a veteran's benefit away, I have no problem in getting rid of that person and making sure we do it properly. And I have no problem with the legal repercussions of that because there's no one at the VA going to stand in the way of a veteran getting the care properly.

And if they're not doing it safely, which we saw many of those were not doing it safely and putting our veterans in harm's way. But I will say it, again, and I think you would agree with me, I will be the biggest cheerleader for every VA employee out there who is out there getting up every morning doing it right, making sure we're taking care of our veterans.

But I believe the only way I can make them better, the only way I can push them is to not allow those not to do it. So, we have to have that accountability. This body passed it unanimously. It is about raising standards. It's about saying that we're going to expect the best and we're going to require the best. Because if I want to retain doctors, if I want to retain nurses, if we want to retain benefits people, then you got to set a standard that says I'm proud to be here. And for me, I want to lead an agency that works and puts our veterans first, and holds accountable those that have not.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Awesome. 2023, it was reported to us, some of our VAs, especially our community care systems, were funding illegal aliens' healthcare. Would you please look into that once you take this office?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Senator, I will. I do not believe any money that's taken outside the mission of the VA to help the veteran is a worthy cause of the money that has been appropriated for the veteran. And we will not be doing that.

Senator TUBERVILLE. You know, we were given a budget shortfall just back last July. We were called and told by the Administration that we're $3 billion short, and we had to come up very, very quickly or we were going to default in the VA. You can imagine how frustrated we all got with that when we found out that we actually had a surplus. I would hope that we take better care of what we do with our money and we know where it's at.

Also, one thing before I go off here, and I didn't get a chance to talk to you about this back when we met, on electronic healthcare. Nobody's told you this, $20 billion on updating our VA's Electronic Healthcare Records over the last decade. The Department of Defense completed their update, yet the VA has nothing to show for the $20 billion. Houston, we got a problem.

Mr. COLLINS. Houston, Atlanta, DC everywhere else, we have a problem. That is not acceptable. That's one of the things that we're going to, as we've said earlier, and we talked about this earlier, to have to get into very quickly. Put every player on the table to make sure that we're getting it right from the VA perspective and from the from Oracle perspective as it's currently held.

DoD and VA are very different. But also, as I said before, we're special but not unique. What we can do, can be done, and there's ways that we can look at that. Let's do what we can do. We're

going to get that right. Even up here, eight years and that much money and no results, only five places, I believe actually still is not acceptable.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator. Senator Sanders.

HON. BERNARD SANDERS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM VERMONT

Senator SANDERS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your new position——

Chairman MORAN. Thank you——

Senator SANDERS. Looking forward to working with you.

Chairman MORAN [continuing]. Former Mr. Chairman.

Senator SANDERS. The job that you have been nominated for is an impossibly difficult job. I just want to say, for the record, that I think Denis McDonough, the gentleman who came before you has done a very good job in the context of what he had to deal with.

Mr. Collins, in two independent assessments last year, the VA outperformed non-VA hospitals in terms of patient satisfaction and hospital quality. I can tell you that in Vermont, you talk to the average veteran who accesses VA, they say, you know what, the care is pretty good. I think that's probably true in most parts of the country, and that takes place within a private healthcare system, which is largely broken and dysfunctional.

It strikes me, from what I have heard, there are three approaches to the VA. There are some folks, extremists, who think to get rid of the VA completely send veterans out into the private sector. Others, including the nominee for Defense Secretary, Mr. Hegseth, who have indicated that the VA should be there for specialized care; people with PTSD, people with amputations, particular problems the veterans have—specialized care. And there are those of us, including myself, who think that when people are asked to put their lives on the line to defend this country, you know what? All veterans are entitled to all of the healthcare that they need. That's my view. Where do you come out on that?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, it's great to sit in the office and talk to you, especially you were chairman, the perspective you have. We come out very similar. I've said before, and I said it to this Committee early on, they'll always be a VA health system for the veteran. And like we talked about in your office, I think what we're going to do is make sure that the VA centers that are strong, can get better.

But also, I have states that I've talked to and other Senators who have maybe one facility that is doing well and another facility that's not. So, we can't break paint with a broad stroke even on the private sector that you mentioned to say that any one in particular is the rule for all. So, I'm for getting that and making sure that we have it.

Senator SANDERS. Okay. Here's the problem. There is a limited amount of money. Community Care spending went from $8 billion in 2014 to $31 billion in 2025. Ideally, what we could say is, hey, you're a veteran, you want to go into a private care, no problem. You want to go to the VA, no problem. We have a strong VA and strong private care. They don't have enough money to do that.

So, in fact, what the debate comes down to is not whether somebody should be able to access community care, but where are we going to put our resources? Are we going to allow the VA to wither on the vine, so to speak? Do you understand where I'm coming from? Are you willing to tell us you're going to fight for a strong VA in every state in this country?

Mr. COLLINS. We're going to, Senator. That's a non-negotiable. We're going to start to fight for a strong VA. Now, what I understand your perspective. You didn't vote for the MISSION Act, which is where community care started. I understand your perspective, but I also understand the will of the body and the law. And I understand veterans today. I believe you can have both. I believe you can have a strong VA as it currently exists and have the community care aspect.

Senator SANDERS. Okay. Vermont issue. You are inheriting an incredible bureaucracy that is very slow moving at times. There are two CBOCs in the Vermont area. One in Chittenden County, our most populated area, one in the southern part of the state, Keene, New Hampshire—access to both Vermont, New Hampshire veterans. It has been moving along rather slowly. Will you assure me that you're going to take a hard look to make sure that those CBOCs get moving rapidly?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Senator. We were talking about with Senator Boozman as well. Those are issues that we've got to look at and make sure the priorities, the money's there. We're going to look sure that——

Senator SANDERS. But it's not just the VSA, it's not just the VA. The VA works with the GSA——

Mr. COLLINS. I understand.

Senator SANDERS [continuing]. And it is a problem. Take a hard look at that one. There are massive staff shortages in the VA, and I am concerned about the hiring freeze that President Trump has initiated. Will you stand up publicly and say, you know what, we need every healthcare, every VA health facility in this country to be adequately staffed. We will not accept staff shortages, and make sure that we have the people that we need?

Mr. COLLINS. I'll advocate to make sure our veterans are taken care of. But I'll also support in the fact that we'll take a look at the current levels of employees that we have and where they're properly located, and we'll work with that. And the President will work under the Executive order that he has given.

Senator SANDERS. Look, in English, we all understand this. There are inefficiencies in the VA. There's waste in the VA. Every government agency. On the other hand, the VA, in general, in my view, does an excellent job. They need the support. So, you want to go after waste, inefficiencies, do it, but make sure that we have the quality of doctors, nurses, staffing, that we need to take care of every veteran in this country.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Tillis.

HON. THOM TILLIS,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA

Senator TILLIS. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Mr. Collins, thank you for being here. You and I have a lot in common. We were both born in August, you, six years after me. We both entered state legislature at the same time in 2007 in two different states. And you got a sister that was born in the same hospital that both of my babies were born in. Am I right? You also, I have the benefit of me tracking, since I lived in Atlanta for about four years, tracking Georgia politics. You are a very good, solid, reasonable Congressman. So, I know all I need to know about supporting your nomination.

I know you've said multiple times you're not going to privatize the VA. You're not forcing veterans out. You've done that. I think you were sworn in in testimony. So, would you just do a pinky swear or two that you're not going to prioritize the VA? Here we go. We got about that air pinky swear.

[Laughter.]

So, the reason that's important is that some people, not everybody, I think that Senator Sanders is genuine and has concerns. But folks, there is no—let me just say again what I've said—every time privatization and forcing veterans out of the VA to seek private care, there is no serious discussion among lawmakers to do that.

And by serious discussion, I mean that could ever see the light of day. I have very few skills. One of them is counting votes. There is simply not enough to even consider it a threat. And the reason why I hit this head on is there are veterans who could be led to believe that that's a risk. It is not a risk. You don't have to come to Washington because a vote is imminent.

The VA is the largest healthcare system in the United States. It does a lot of things good and in many cases, it does it better than the private care providers could ever imagine because of the unique status it has. In many cases veterans, serving veterans. So, again, thank you for that pinky swear.

Now, let's move on to the unpleasant part of my discussion. It has nothing to do with you. I have supported every VA nominee who's come before this Committee. And I supported the Secretary of the VA when I came in the Obama administration. I've had a great working relationship up to and including with Secretary McDonough. I have concerns, even some that date back to VA Secretary Wilkie, who was my MLA before he went on to be VA Secretary.

The implementation of the Electronic Health Record is a bipartisan, multi-administration disaster. There is no way on God's green earth that we should have spent $10 billion to have only a fraction of the VISNs even touched. So, do I have your commitment to go through that program, to quickly get it moving again and get an integrated health chart that also can integrate with the DoD so that we can finally have a seamless transition from active status or reserve status, to veteran status and provide premium care at the VA?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, Senator Tillis, for the very reason of this is; it's what you just said about seamless care. It's a safety and security issue for my veterans.

Senator TILLIS. It absolutely is. The Electronic Health Record, I've got a real problem. We need to have a review. I don't know if it's an Inspector General's report or something else, but folks, I did large scale systems implementation work for the vast majority of my career. I've done that more than I've done being a U.S. Senator or a State Representative. This is a disaster.

And I would like the people involved, not only the contractors, but having been the contractor before, my guess is it's rooted in bureaucracy and people responsible for the implementation within the VA not doing it right. So, will you commit to me to doing a project review? I'll come to your turf to do it.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes. We're looking forward to the project review. This for me has been one of the—when first looking at it, you know, only up here would this allow it to go on as long as it had. So, look, I'm putting on notice today that I'm committed to everyone here. We're going to bring everyone to the table, that's vendor, that's VA, everybody in the middle——

Senator TILLIS. Good.

Mr. COLLINS [continuing]. And figure out what this problem is, because it's time to fix it.

Senator TILLIS. Well, I'd love to be at the table when you have some of those discussions, to be honest with you, and lend you some free consulting advice.

Last thing I want to leave you with, because I say it in most of the hearings, I did not vote for the PACT Act. In spite of the fact that my office was responsible for the formulation of the TEAM Act that was in that bill, which was to provide care to warriors who were exposed to toxics. And also, the Camp Lejeune Toxics Act, which my colleague Senator Sullivan has been trying to work to reduce the compensation.

I didn't vote for it because I was absolutely convinced it was going to be where it is today. It's $700 billion between mandatory and discretionary spending, unfunded bill that got out of the oven too soon. And now, we know you've got shortfalls that you're going to have to fix and the billions of dollars because we didn't take the time to actually get the PACT Act right.

I hated not being able to vote for that bill, but I voted against it because we promised out of this Committee that we would fix it before it got a vote on the floor. Now, we've got to fix it. And you can count me as somebody that will be helpful.

Mr. COLLINS. Thanks, Senator. I look forward to that because that is going to be one of the first issues we've got to tackle from the budgetary standpoint. But also, and I will say to the Committee, and we've talked about this in many of your offices, I'm also looking ahead to the Elizabeth Dole Act, and our actual implementation, and implementation cost on it. I think it's something we've got to take care of, but it's got an implementation cost as well.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hassan.

HON. MARGARET WOOD HASSAN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and congratulations on your chairmanship. I look forward to working with you and Ranking Member Blumenthal. And Congressman Collins, it is good to see you. It was good to sit down with you the other day. Congratulations on your nomination. And thank you to you for your service to our Nation and to your family as well for their sacrifices because we know when an individual serves, the whole family serves, and I welcome them here today as well.

One quick comment to follow-up on what Senator Slotkin was asking you about. I appreciated your expression that you would be willing to let the President know, or anybody else in the administration, know if you thought the budget cuts would hurt service to veterans.

And I will just say, having done this work at the state level, and now here, it is tempting for people in your position to tell their bosses whatever budget you give me will get the job done, because that's what you want to be able to do. But cutting direct care people in a healthcare system, cutting people who coordinate care so that veterans can get integrated care can really, really harm veterans. So, I will hold you to your statement that you will stand up for veterans in the budget discussions because it's going to be real important.

Mr. COLLINS. And thank you, Senator, I allow on that question because it is true. I mean, as we've said and brings the uniqueness, I've been on that side. There's only limited dollars. And there is consequences, and there's a big thought up here on Capitol Hill that we vote on ideas. We don't vote on ideas. We vote on words on paper. And those cost money.

So, yes, I'll stand up. And look, the President has made it very clear to take care of veterans. And I will say as we look for efficiencies, we look for the things to run those agencies, I'll say here's the cost benefit of that, and we'll move forward with that, making sure we take care of the veteran.

Senator HASSAN. Well, I appreciate that. I want to move on now to a topic that I know Senator Sullivan also touched on. President-elect Trump supported a full-service VA hospital for New Hampshire when he was on the campaign trail. I've supported a full-service hospital in our state for years and will gladly work with you and the President to make that happen.

In the meantime, though, the current Manchester VA Medical Center is almost 75 years old and it needs significant upgrades. The facility's age is showing. Twice over the past eight years, pipes have burst, temporarily closing parts of the medical center. And when I say temporarily, we're talking months. We scheduled surgeries, the whole nine yards. It has been terrible.

So, following a push from the New Hampshire delegation to prioritize improvements to the medical center, the VA has begun implementing a multi-year upgrade plan. Will you commit to continuing these upgrades to make sure that Granite State Veterans have the best possible medical facility to receive their care at, and will you come up to New Hampshire to visit the facility and meet our veterans?

Mr. COLLINS. I'll take the last one first. Yes.

[Laughter.]

Senator HASSAN. Good.

Mr. COLLINS. But I assure you not only Granite State Veterans, but all across the country, they'll will be taken care of in looking at our needs. The infrastructure needs, I'm glad we're talking about that today, because it's not just the new facility, it's not just the new CBOC, it's taking these older facilities that, as you said, once they're shut down and then the bureaucratic process to get it fixed. And so, that is it.

But also, with President Trump's commitment—look, I'm going to support the President. We're going to look to that hospital. But I think you've brought up a bigger issue that I hope all the Committee members will understand is—I wish we could, as I said before, have this rose-colored old pixie dust it'll just fix itself. But construction issues are going to be one of our hardest because of age of facilities.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you. Let's talk about rural veterans. They face several challenges in accessing VA healthcare. For example, they have to travel long distances to access their VA healthcare facilities. And that usually means that they're going to want to schedule multiple appointments on the same day so they don't have to do all the travel back and forth.

Unfortunately, some VA medical appointments can only be scheduled by calling the individual clinic directly. Meaning, veterans often have to make several calls to multiple disconnected offices just to try to coordinate and schedule their appointments. And then, they schedule one, then they call back the other and find out the slot they thought they had is gone.

So, that's why Senator Boozman and I introduced the bipartisan Improving Veterans Access to Quality Care Act, which would require the VA to create a streamlined scheduling system where veterans can either call or go online to view and schedule appointments for all of their VA healthcare.

Congressman Collins, will you support this effort and work with me and Senator Boozman to pass this bill and implement its change to help our veterans?

Mr. COLLINS. Well, Senator, I look forward to seeing in that and looking into it further. But I'm going to tell you from a conceptual standpoint, the better question for me is, why haven't we almost got there anyway?

Senator HASSAN. Yes.

Mr. COLLINS. I mean, because of that thing about, if I can—I mean, and I'm not to reduce appointment times to an app, but when you can order five people's food in five different places at the same time on your phone, why can't I go to one place? And I think for our younger veterans.

And I think we talked about this in your office. For our older veterans, it is a different way. They need to be personal. From my dad who's probably watching now, he wants to be on the phone, but the rest of them pick up the phone, let me just get my three appointments and be done with it.

Senator HASSAN. Yes. And I thank you, Mr. Chair. And I will follow-up in writing with you about the one last question I wanted to talk about, which was just the implementation of the Dole Act.

Home care is incredibly important. It's the way, it should be, the wave of the future because most people want to age at home or get their care if they have chronic illness or disabilities at home. Something near and dear to my heart and the heart of veterans, and I look forward to working with you on that.

Mr. COLLINS. And just briefly, Mr. Chairman, I just want to be real brief about it. That is something with us, but I'm very proud of what y'all have accomplished there. But it's going to now take us implementation to make sure we do it right. If I'm confirmed, you'll have that commitment.

Senator HASSAN. Thank you, sir.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Hassan Thank you. Senator Cassidy.

HON. BILL CASSIDY,
U.S. SENATOR FROM LOUISIANA

Senator CASSIDY. Hey, Congressman Collins, great job in the chair. You're going to be a fabulous Secretary of the VA, and you have my support. You're a Georgia Bulldog fan, but, you know, that's okay. I mean, not everybody can be a Go Tiger.

Mr. COLLINS. Go Dogs.

Senator CASSIDY. Listen, I've been concerned because there's such a backlog in terms of people applying for VA disability benefits from whatever program there is. It just doesn't happen. And when it finally happens, sometimes the person's dead. Now, when I speak to people and read about the use of artificial intelligence, someone says it's the perfect bureaucrat. That once you set on the facts, it can process in a tremendous amount of information next to instantaneously, and come up with the same decision based upon the same set of facts over, and over, and over.

Now, but I also learn it's only something that happens if you lean into it. If you just say, well, it's really great, we'll get there when it happens. It never happens. If you say, we are going to set up a system in which we "red team" it, and we're going to compare it to our best reviewers, we're going to then compare the best reviewers to the AI, whichever is different, we're going to figure out why it's different. And if the AI is not as good, we're going to continue to refine it until we can scale it, and a veteran does not need to wait for his or her benefits. What do you think about that vision?

Mr. COLLINS. I wish it wasn't being presented as such a novel concept because it's really true. We can do that. And as you, from your medical profession, looking at why are we not using AI and the benefits of IT to actually take, especially from the benefit perspective, and take the ones that are easy, the ones that match the box that we can get out the way so that we can actually still hands-on those that are a little bit more difficult.

Here's some numbers that I'm sure you're familiar with, and this Committee is familiar with, and I'm proud of. Under President Trump and the previous administration that the backlog on the benefits cases got down to 65,000. I believe in the past four years, there's been 130,000 added, $1 billion added to the budget, and al-

most 70,000 employees. And right now, there's a 265,000 backlog down from almost, I believe, double that. We've went up with everything else.

Why are we not able to get out some of these in better ways? And that means doing efficiency, looking at AI, looking at other technology, not just from the benefit perspective, but also from the medical perspective as well. We've got a healthcare record system that is non-existent right now that we're going to have to do, as you said, that "red team" approaches, your wording.

So, I'm looking for every possible way that I can make it better. Why would I be satisfied for a system that is old, and outdated, or non-existent when my goal, and my purpose, and my mission is to take care of a veteran?

Senator CASSIDY. Now, let me suggest because one thing that happens here is that the agency says, give us the money and we'll come up with a system. And then two years later, and then two years later, and then two years until you finally pull the plug. So, somebody once said, you should go out on your bid and say, we want the system at least to be run on a pilot method within six months. Because what you're getting is people who already know how to do it, indeed are already doing it in one form and they're adapting their system to yours.

Now, I would suggest as we work as a team, that we come up with something that we would say, okay, you got six months to do it, and then we're going to do it. If we see veterans who have been waiting forever to get their stuff, getting it quickly, getting it appropriately, not too much, not too little, then we can take it to scale. But other agencies have just taken the money, and taken the money, and it has become a black hole. So, thoughts about that?

Mr. COLLINS. My main thought about that is someone who's been on this Hill in dealing with budgets, and it was the merry thing that most of us go home and do town halls. They do not understand how we do appropriations up here. They do not understand how we spend money up here. They don't get to do that at home. They don't get to do it with their own budget.

So, when we tell them, oh, we're spending money but show nothing for it, that's something that's a foreign concept. And I think it's just fostered the distrust that we see. So, for me, setting deadlines is the only way you get things done. Setting deadlines, and appropriate measures, and metrics are the way you get things done. I am going to be one that is actually going to say, here's the defining aspect of what we've been given. Let's use the best results. Let's use the best processes. Let's use the employees we have and the best people.

Senator CASSIDY. I like that as opposed to $10 billion, figure it out. It's going to be, here's a chunk of money. If you can show you can do it, we'll take it to scale, but if not, we're pulling the plug and going someplace else. So, anyway, thank you.

Mr. COLLINS. Thanks, Senator.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Dr. Cassidy. Senator Duckworth.

HON. TAMMY DUCKWORTH,
U.S. SENATOR FROM ILLINOIS

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Congratulations on your chairmanship. It's good to be on another committee with you. Congressman, welcome. I really enjoyed our conversation. I'm not going to speak further on privatization of VA, my opposition to it, but you know I think that you would agree, would you not, that VA is uniquely suited to provide the highest quality of healthcare to veterans? And that privatizing VA would create a significant challenge wherein veteran care would be outsourced to providers not equipped for this specialized training, directly impacting the quality of care afforded to veterans.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, again, it was good to talk to you. I you would not believe how many times I've used our conversation in discussions with CBOCs and other things. Of course, I mean, I think when you look at this issue that the VA is uniquely positioned to deal with veterans and has the data, which you and I talked about, that can provide not only help for our veterans currently in the system, but even outside the system. Using that data then to help others outside.

We have a unique control group, if you would, that can actually look at that. So, I think with someone we can definitely continue to work on, and as I've stated before, there'll always be a VA healthcare center for those veterans that come home.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Yes. Just keep VA the medical center home, and then if they need care for their specialized treatment, they can go somewhere else. But as long as the VA know what's happening and is keeping track, I think that's really important for the veterans' best health.

Mr. COLLINS. I think as we do it efficiently and we make sure the veteran is the center of that, that's exactly what we need to. You and I mentioned this, that I think we need more veteran—the issue of women's veterans coming in, which are a large population of our veterans coming in now, making sure that if they want to receive that care in the VA—for instance, right now, there's depending on discussion, you know, lack of mammogram equipment. Those are things that are in large VAs who satisfy a large number of female veterans. They're having, you know, to do that. If they wanted to stay in, they couldn't. So, I think working at both ways is where we need to be.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Yes. I think the medical, what is the best medical treatment is where we need to go. I mean, in the case of mammograms, you know, you need somebody who reads thousands and thousands of mammograms. And if you only take care of small number of female veterans, I wouldn't want to have my mammogram read by someone who only reads a hundred mammograms a year, as opposed to a partner organization like that rural hospital or somebody who reads thousands of mammograms so that they can better spot any problems.

Mr. COLLINS. Exactly. And that brings me to—I'm going sort of maybe jump ahead of you a little bit. I think it goes back to your discussion we had in the office about the CBOC and rural hospital issue. And I think what you made was a very good point, and I'm going to take it a step further about what you just said though. It's

a sharpening of skills. For those of us who've been to Iraq, and have been to Afghanistan, and those, we saw trauma and emergency care at its finest.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Yes.

Mr. COLLINS. I mean, if they came through the Hero's Highway at Balad, 98 percent of those made it back home alive. Now, some of them didn't. You were one that did. There's some who didn't, but they got back home. And I remember a time that I sat with a young man who I was with him and prayed with him, and he had the—I'll never forget him because he had blonde hair, blue eyes. And I went back later that evening and he was gone. They had already got him on a plane and got home.

Later, a week and a half later, I looked at "Stars and Stripes" and I saw his picture. But I was comforted by knowing he was back home when he passed. That is sharpening of skills. And in the VA we need to have that. We have to make sure that our veterans are getting that same kind of treatment so that our skills and their treatment are matching.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Wonderful, thank you. If confirmed, will you commit to working with myself and my colleagues on this Committee to strengthen and refine VA policies that improve wait times and access to VA healthcare rather than resorting to privatization?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes. I think that is what we're looking at right now, is a VA that has the VA healthcare system. And we, again, it goes back to the service of the veteran. I'll say it again, I've said it before, I'm say it again; when they have to call my office when I was in Congress or your office, now that is a failure from the VA, and it's not a failure on the people. So, anybody try to twist what I'm saying. That's not what I'm saying.

The VA has a mission to take care of veterans. If for some reason the veteran's not able to get that care, then we need to step up and make sure they answer why. So, yes, trimming down, wait times, making sure they get that because some of the things we could be missing are preventative care that could actually help us long-term in our cost perspective if we're catching it early.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I'm glad you mentioned preventative care. Right now, preventative healthcare is something that patients in the Affordable Care Act or other places do not have to pay for their preventative care. So, your prostate cancer screening, your mammograms for breast cancer, colon's cancer screening, your statins for your cholesterol medication, you don't pay a copay for that, but veterans do.

If confirmed, will you support making a non-controversial common sense fix to ensure that VA coverage aligns without a commercial healthcare and TRICARE, and help me eliminate the copays for veterans for preventative healthcare?

Mr. COLLINS. I look forward to working with this Committee on that because I do believe, as you do, that the preventive aspect of that is very important.

Senator DUCKWORTH. Thank you. I yield back, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blackburn.

HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And Mr. Collins, always good to see you. I appreciate that.

As we served in the House, you were known as being a consensus builder and a problem solver. And I think as we look at the VA and the situation that is there, we need someone who can build consensus among the employees and solve some problems that are existing in the VA.

So, you made a comment about it was important to get the right people doing the right job. And I agree with that. And as we have been overseeing the VA, something that has been a consistent problem is the return-to-work policy, and the lack of individuals that are working full-time. At one point out of VA benefits, they were only required, according to Secretary McDonough, they only had to work in-person 2 out of 10 days. And then in healthcare, they had to work in-person 5 out of the 10 days.

So, that is a problem. And I fully believe that's why the backlog, as you mentioned, that long-term backlog is at 265,000. If you put those that are under 120 days on that list, you are at 956,000. This is because people don't go to work. So, where are you on that and having that return-to-work policy?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. It is good to see you. It's also good to see you back over here as we've worked together many times. And I do pride myself, as I mentioned in my opening statement, about the stuff that we worked on, bipartisan Music Modernization Act, which you are such a great champion of as well. And we're going to have to work together on this.

But I do believe people need to come to work. The President made it very clear. He made that very clear that people need to come to work. Now, there is certain issues and times and before the question is asked that we have a large portion of the VA workforce is unionized and they're in contracts, but we're going to work together to get people back to work.

Senator BLACKBURN. What percentage of those employees are union?

Mr. COLLINS. 80 percent. Approximately, 80 percent of 470-ish thousand.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay.

Mr. COLLINS. And some of them and the telework agreement stuff. Look, we're going to encourage them to come back to work. We're going to follow the President's directive in that, and we're going to make sure that we get people in there. Because at the end of the day, it's about veterans. My hospital employees, if I was confirmed, they have to show up every day.

Senator BLACKBURN. Okay. That is encouraging because you look at the—we've talked about the health records, the EHRs and the fumbling, the $15 billion that has been spent on that not to have those records. The way there is no data transfer from DoD to the VA on those health records. This is a problem we can fix. We've got a lot of good health IT experts in Nashville that could fix this.

And when they hear from people that are in the VA system about they can't get any care, the wait times, and we've talked some about the backlog at the Fort Campbell facility, VA facility,

the wait to get a primary care appointment today, and we've just checked our numbers is 81 days. And in Chattanooga, it's 110 days. In Murfreesboro, it is 54 days. That is completely unacceptable.

And if people are going to not show up to work, if they're beholden to the union and say that it is about them and not about the vet, that is something that is just completely unacceptable. And it is one of the reasons we need to strengthen community care. The suicide rate, that 34.7 individuals per 100,000 of our vets that choose suicide, the mental health components, and having that community care where they can access it in their community without having to travel, having an EHR that they are carrying with them to the doctor, that will be helpful.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, you've hit a multitude of things there that are all important to the very end and aspect, and that's the health, and safety, and the wellness of our veteran. The healthcare record system, I mean, there's nowhere else we can even point to. I mean, you cannot—if a doctor in the VA walked out and decided to go take a job in the private sector, guess what they're going to find when they get there? Electronic Healthcare Records.

Senator BLACKBURN. That's right.

Mr. COLLINS. So, the system that we currently use, I mean, it still is F1, F2. It is just unacceptable because it creates what the problem that you've seen going forward. Look, I believe in all workforces, and I believe that the employees at the VA, whether union or not, are very valuable. And I respect that.

I was years ago, five years in the Food and Commercial Workers Union when I was in a big start grocery store. I get the issue. But also, I believe we ought to bring people back to work. That we ought to make it in a way that people are not only employees, but at the end of the day, we remember it's not about the VA, it's about the veteran.

Senator BLACKBURN. That's exactly right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Blackburn. We're going to have a brief second round. I'm going to turn to Senator Blumenthal to begin that, but I want to ask unanimous consent at this point to add to the hearing record letters of support for Congressman Collins' nomination.

They come from the Wounded Warrior Project, AMVETS, Blinded Veterans Association, Military-Veterans Advocacy, Avalon Action Alliance, America First Vets, National Defense Committee, Mission Roll Call, Burn Pits 360, Jewish War Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Luke's Wings, and the Valor Mission Project.

Without objection, those letters of support are entered into the record.

[The letters of support appear on pages 113–126 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal, I recognize you for five minutes.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thanks, Mr. Chairman. As we were talking a little bit earlier. Last night, the White House issued various Executive orders. Some of them dealt with federal hiring freeze,

freeze on regulations, and other issues. We're still reviewing them in my office.

The issue of a workforce hiring freeze memorandum claims that it will not, "adversely impact the provision of social security, Medicare, or veterans' benefits." I'd like to know from you, what does that mean in practical terms about the employees who deliver veterans' healthcare or work in cemeteries? Does this language exempt all of the VA's positions from the hiring freeze?

Mr. COLLINS. I think, Senator, we're still, like you, examining that, but we support the President's initiative here in, in the freeze. But also, I take as far as what it says, I'll take it at the words that it's on the paper, and that's not going to affect it because we have people doing those benefits packages right now. We have people working at that. And the implication would be that adding more people would fix whatever the problem is. I'm convinced right now that the workers and the benefits we need to make better efficiencies with what we currently have, so I support that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Yes. That's not reassuring to me because I'm asking not about the VA employees who work on benefits. I'm asking about the folks who are in the hospitals, in the care facilities, at the cemeteries. They're not dispersing benefits. They're providing care.

And as you well know, there are extraordinary problems in recruiting and retaining; the doctors, the nurses and filling their ranks where there are openings right now. So, the explicit language of that memorandum seems to include them in the hiring freeze.

Mr. COLLINS. Going by the way you worded, I'll say this. So, hiring freeze and the wording that you use, and I do not have this before me, so I'm not going to comment completely on it, I do not have it in front of me. I'm going off of the memory, and we're still examining that as well. I can assure you, President Trump in this Executive order is to get an assessment on where we are with our employees. It is not to take away from anything that is currently there in future.

And the way that your question is worded is implying that they would not be there to do the veterans' healthcare, the cemetery work. That's going to continue. This new freeze, new hire freeze is not there. We may not at this point bring in a new person tomorrow unless we needed, but this is where we're at. And I think what he's done is to get an assessment on where we are.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, you and I are trading a lot of words. Let me come right to the point. I'm asking you to fight to fill the openings, not a hiring freeze in the ranks of the doctors, the nurses, the attendants, everybody who works in care facilities or in veteran cemeteries, rather than leaving those positions open because those folks are needed to care for veterans.

Will you seek an exemption to the hiring freeze for those positions that concern veterans' care, including the veterans' crisis line?

Mr. COLLINS. I'll take everything that you've said in consideration and understand the freeze and the Executive order, while at the same time, if confirmed, be willing to make sure that there's

nothing missing in the process. As you said first, we're sharing words. I think we're saying the same thing.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, no, we're not. With all due respect.

Mr. COLLINS. I respect that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. This is going to be a first test of your leadership, whether you fight for an exemption in the hiring freeze for the non-veterans benefits employees who are needed to care for veterans at medical facilities and other places, including the veterans' crisis line, rather than have them covered by that hiring freeze.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I view this as not as a test of what I'll do. I believe it is a test of two different assumptions, and assuming that just because there's opening that there's an actual need at that point that makes a veteran miss their benefits of healthcare. I think the two, we're coming at it from two separate perspectives. There may be openings, but there was openings yesterday. There was openings last week. This is simply looking at ahead to say where we're at this point.

I think we're coming at this as two separate perspectives. I respect yours, greatly, but I think what we're going to see is no one on the veteran healthcare side is going to miss their healthcare provider because of this new hiring freeze. The President is doing a prudent step as he comes into office to make sure that we have a good handle on what we've got.

And going forward, I will always fight, Senator, and I've told you this in your office, and I'll tell you again here for what we need at our facilities. But I'm also not going to fight for issues in which I believe that I've not had a chance to study and make sure that this issue is taken care of. I do not believe this is going to have the impact that you're having, because I think we're coming at it from two different perspectives.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, I will just say, I don't want to get into an argument here, but there are possible openings where, let's say, the head of the West Haven VA facility says, "Oh, well, we don't need to fill that position."

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, but——

Senator BLUMENTHAL. There are also openings where the director of the facility is saying; we need more nurses, we need more doctors, we need more mental health care. You and I have talked about this.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You can't provide veterans' healthcare without the people, the skilled professionals to do it.

Mr. COLLINS. I appreciate that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And I hear you saying, if there's an opening, it means that we don't need somebody for that opening.

Mr. COLLINS. No. I think, Senator, just a general reminder. Last week, Secretary McDonough could have filled those positions. He chose not to or couldn't find anybody.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, he may have wanted to, and you may have talked to him about it, but it's not easy to fill those positions.

Mr. COLLINS. And, Senator, that's why we're taking the perspective of where we're at. And again, I appreciate that we'll work on

this together, but I also, I respect what the President's done. I think it's a prudent step looking forward, and that the healthcare is not going to be compromised in that process. I support that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Let me move on. Will you commit to expending every effort and every dollar to reach every veteran at risk of suicide, including those who are not now enrolled in the VA system?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, that's the easiest question you've asked all day, and I appreciate it. No, yes, I will do everything possible. This from my heart, and you've heard it mentioned. There's nothing more sacred to me, or my perspective, and my faith, and my God, that everyone is made in the image of God and deserves life and encouragement for that.

I think we need to actually have more, any way we can, to reach that person. As someone who's been on the other end of that line, when somebody called me and said, "Chap, I'm ready to end it." I'm not willing to let anybody go by because I believe in the inheritance of life and the grace that was given to me.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. As you know the rate of firearm suicide is significantly higher among veterans than non-veterans. And so, will you commit to looking for ways that firearms-related suicides can be reduced?

Mr. COLLINS. I'm committed to looking at any instrumentality that takes the life of one of our veterans.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. On the issue of homelessness. Is there more that can be done to prevent or address veterans' homelessness?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes. There are many things that need to be done, and I think we've got to look at it from a cross-government approach. Not only just with the VA, but with HUD, with also with HHS. There are many aspects I don't think we're touching at this point. So, for me, it is again, about how do we make the best resources of the limited funds that come from our government.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You've been asked, and I think you've answered, and I don't want to repeat this issue; whether you will continue to abide by the VA rule concerning abortion counseling and care in cases of rape, incest, life or health endangerment of a pregnant veteran. Will you commit that you will inform this Committee if and when you begin reconsideration of the present rule?

Mr. COLLINS. I will keep this Committee informed. The Chairman and the Ranking Member will know any discussions and decisions as we can get toward that decision.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. As you begin consideration, yes, you'll let us know.

Mr. COLLINS. We'll get into that when we get in there. I'll let keep the Committee informed of things that we have going on. I have to get in there first, if confirmed by this Committee, which I'd hope to earn votes for. We'll see what we got when we get there.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And let me just ask you, finally, and I appreciate the Chairman indulging this additional time——

Chairman MORAN. Despite your early earlier commentary about me.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, I don't see anyone waiting to——

[Laughter.]

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I'm sorry. I apologize to Senator King. Just one more quick question. The PACT Act, as you know, established the Toxic Exposure Fund to pay for extended and expanded benefits without impacting other non-Defense discretionary spending. If confirmed, do you intend to advocate for undoing or altering the Toxic Exposure Fund, or would you like to consider it and continue it in its present form?

Mr. COLLINS. I think any changes to any program will be prerendered for me to make policy at this or discuss that. I think we'll look at it the possibility, but I think the intent of Congress will be carried out. I know there's some discretionary with the funding issues with that from the VA. We're going to look at that as we go forward.

But I'm at this point, I want to see where we're at because there is a concern that we made proper implementation. It could have caused some of the budget shortfalls. And we have another program right on top of it, which is going to be the Elizabeth Dole that I promised and commit to you that we're going to make sure that we look at, so that we can properly implement your intent and the Congress's intent.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, just for the record I hope that you'll continue this Fund because it provides for a solid source of benefits for those veterans who are suffering from diseases relating to toxic exposures, and that you'll continue the outreach program that Secretary McDonough started. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator King.

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to make something very clear. I don't want AI to decide if one of my veterans is entitled to the benefits they've earned. Period. Kapeesh?

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, there's no veteran that's going to miss the benefit that they earned by the position and the way they process their claims. But I think you and I will both come to a conclusion that if there are better ways to process a claim and our veterans can get their benefits quicker, then I'm willing to look at any opportunity to get their veterans benefits quicker. And if that involves AI, then I'm not willing to take it off the payroll.

I'm not willing, though, to have them put in a position where AI is randomly in a situation, especially with benefits and others that are more difficult, there'll always be a person there to oversee that process.

Senator KING. Well, the experience thus far with AI and the insurance industry is not positive. And I don't want our veterans having to go through a claims litigation in order to overturn the decision of a machine somewhere. So, I understand you're not willing to take it off the table, but I certainly hope it will be handled with great care because it will be very tempting to reduce staff and replace it with this technology. But I'm not confident in the technology right now to be making these life-or-death decisions for our veterans.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes. I understand and respect your position, Senator. I do not view this as a life-or-death decision. I think these are decisions that could be made in how we look at the best efficiencies. And, look, there'll always be in my mind, especially when it comes to the veteran and benefits, someone that overlooks and

oversees that as well to make sure that it is working properly, if went that way.

Senator KING. Thank you. You are going to be under tremendous pressure as we move into this difficult budgetary situation, and there's a lot of pressure to reduce the budget. I think has been pointed out here. The Veterans Administration is one of the largest pots of money in the Federal Government. It's very easy to focus on the bureaucracy which carries with it a kind of negative connotation.

But I would point out that in many cases, staff cuts, equal benefit cuts, because if there's nobody there to answer the phone, or if the process is delayed to the point where the veteran dies or just gives up, that's in effect, a benefit cut. So, as you're under this pressure, and I believe you will be, I hope you'll take care to balance per necessary efficiencies against the loss of services.

You said repeatedly, and you said in my office, and I love it, you don't want us to have to be advocating for our veterans because they ought to get their benefits without having to come to a Congressional office. Well, if staff cuts end up having nobody answer the phone, or answer the phone after only 100 rings, or say we'll have to talk to you six days from now, or six months from now, that's going to only aggravate the problem. And you're going to be hearing from us on a daily basis instead of every other day.

Mr. COLLINS. I think, Senator, your point is taken, and I understand. I think the interesting question is, is these very things arise right now at the staffing levels that we have. I think there's more of an issue here. Are we doing things as efficiently in processing as we can with the staffing that we currently have, whether that's with more or less staff.

I think sometimes you have to look at the process. I mean, why is it that we're back up at 250,000 backlog of benefits when we've had $130 billion in increase in funds and 70,000 employees? Something's broken about that.

Senator KING. I agree. And I commend you for wanting to follow-up on that. And, again, I have no problem with efficiency. And I think I can't complain about a hiring freeze. I actually signed a hiring freeze in my inaugural address as Governor. So, I understand that.

On the other hand, I think the point that Senator Blumenthal was making is the hiring freeze should not apply to direct care workers. If my Togus Hospital in Maine needs a cardiologist, and it's been open for a couple of months because they're hard to find, this hiring freeze should not prohibit them from continuing to search for, and if they can find a cardiologist to sign them up. I hope you'll distinguish between direct care workers and others who serve veterans behind the scenes.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. If confirmed, we're going to always make sure that, as I've said many times before, no matter what the issue is, I'll always fight for making sure our veterans are getting the care in the proper way that they need to.

Senator KING. The final point, there's no answer necessary for this, but one of the things you're going to be having to face is increasing demands for mental health services and long-term care. Long-term care as our veterans age is become going to become a

greater and greater issue. Elizabeth Dole Act starts to address that. But I just commend that to your thought process. And perhaps you can have people thinking about this; how are we going to provide those services that are going to become more and more necessary as time goes on?

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you, Senator. I appreciate the things that are already keeping me up at night. If confirmed about this job, I appreciate you giving me more, but I also look forward to reaching out to you for help in that as well.

Senator KING. I do appreciate that. Thank you. I commend you for your participation this morning. Look forward to supporting your nomination.

Mr. COLLINS. Thank you so much. Appreciate it.

Chairman MORAN. Senator King, thank you very much. Let me just try to wrap up my thoughts and questions to you. And it's just a miscellaneous of things.

First of all, I would tell you that we work closely with the Inspector General at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I find him valuable both to me and to this Committee, but should be valuable to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Anything that you want to say in regard to utilization of Inspector General's reports and how the Department will respond?

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, sir, Mr. Chairman. When I was Ranking Member of House Judiciary, this was one of the issues that we dealt with the Judiciary Committee, but also the Department of Justice, but also in other committees I served on.

Inspectors General play a vital role. We're not always possibly going to agree with the outcome, but we can come to a conclusion because they are always having other eyes on a situation that is provided. I'm one of those that believes in gathering a lot of input and then making a decision. So, if you're having input from an Inspector General who's looking out for the best interest of what the VA is for, then I'll be working with them, and I'll look forward.

Chairman MORAN. I didn't mean to suggest, and don't think I did, that you need to agree with the Inspector General. I do think that that extra set of eyes in the professional way that that investigation is conducted has value. It certainly gives us a greater opportunity for oversight. But that same kind of oversight is what a Secretary of Department of Veterans Affairs should be looking for, just like we do.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, sir.

Chairman MORAN. We have a habit here of passing legislation. And there's lots of bills that are introduced. Certainly, some of them actually become law. And one of the things that I think it's important for this Committee to try to assure is that we don't just take the applause, the pat on the back with our veterans or veteran organizations because we introduced a piece of legislation or we passed a piece of legislation. The real goal is to make sure that the legislative efforts, when a bill becomes law, that it actually benefits veterans.

You and that Department of Veterans Affairs have a lot to say and a lot to determine whether that is the outcome. But I see it as our responsibility, this Committee's responsibility, to see that the laws that we pass actually have the outcome, the intended con-

sequence that we were seeking when we decided by a majority vote in the House, and a super majority vote in the Senate, that this is something that matters and make a difference in veterans' lives and well-being.

So, implementation. I'm saying this perhaps for the benefit of the Committee more than you. But we ought not be satisfied with the outcome of our work with the passage of a piece of legislation. I don't know that that requires any response from you.

Mr. COLLINS. Could I respond to that, Mr. Chairman?

Chairman MORAN. Please.

Mr. COLLINS. Because I think it goes back to the uniqueness of my qualifications for this job is being where you've been. And it's real easy to go around and say, oh, we passed this. I was privileged enough to have—I believe it was 19 red lines actually passed into laws, some big stuff. First Step Act, criminal justice reform. We did Defend Trade Secrets. I have some of my former staff that were here with me that I literally stand on their shoulders. Because they did work and the staff behind you who do good work.

But now I'm getting to take, hopefully with the confirmation of this body, be able to step into a role in which I get to see the other end of it. Those words on paper actually matter to me. And I believe that carrying that out is one of my highest callings, working for this President who's had the trust in me to put me into this position in his administration. I look forward to this opportunity.

Chairman MORAN. I thank you for that response. You mentioned the staff behind us, and rightfully so. You compliment and highlight the value and importance of their work. We have staff inquiries to the Department of Veterans Affairs that go back six months with no response. And we've worked with the previous staff at the VA, the previous Secretary, and there was a great intent to see that the answers come. It will mean that it has to be prioritized.

And so, you have indicated earlier that you're going to be very responsive to Congress, those two, like introducing a piece of legislation, or words that you should say. And I hope that you can find every method possible to give us the information that we need to respond to what's going on at the Department of Veterans Affairs. And most importantly, accurate, but also timely.

Mr. COLLINS. Mr. Chairman, there's many things that I've talked about today, and I've enjoyed this time with this Committee. But there's one thing that will be true. The way that we interact with this Hill, as of my confirmation and I've the ability to sit in that seat, will change. The legislative affairs office is going to be much more on the Hill. They're going to be much more involved, and they're going to get you answers. Six months is not tolerable. Again, I go back to the fact I've written those letters too, and it's not going to happen.

Chairman MORAN. It has taken way too long in many, many instances. And QFRs in a hearing in which we ask for Members the opportunity to ask additional questions at the end of the hearing, those responses are terribly, terribly slow, and again, impedes the capability of the Committee doing its work.

One of my experiences is that we bring a problem to the Department of Veterans Affairs, and at least on a number of occasions, we're successful in changing the policy or approach at the Depart-

ment. So, again, much of what I know about what's going on with veterans is because they tell me what's going on with veterans. And we discover there's a problem. We highlight that problem for the Department. But on many, many occasions, when the answer comes back from the Department, the central office of the Department of Veterans Affairs; we've changed it. You're right. This needs to be different than it's been, and we're going to conduct ourselves differently.

The challenge becomes when the VISN in Kansas or anybody else's VISN doesn't know the changes have taken place in the central office. So, we can have a few high-five moments, we've solved a problem, but when it gets to the field, they've never heard of what we have been told in Washington, DC by the Department.

Mr. COLLINS. A high-five in Washington, DC is a nothing in Kansas if it's not implemented. Look, that's one of the things I'm excited about. I come to this in a new position while I've been doing—I've been a part of the Hill, but also media and social media. Look at the applications that are out there now that we can tell the good.

The Department is going to hear from me directly. It's not going to come through memos. It's not going to come from me sitting behind a desk in some central office. It's going to come from me through videos that are going to be on our social media. It's going to be through emails that we're going to send encouraging them to know, this is my direction. They'll hear from me that if we're still getting the idea that a veteran has to call their Congressman or their Senator for help, then we're missing the mark somehow. They're going to hear it directly from me.

And here's the other thing. They're going to see me. They're not going to have to wonder what I'm thinking. Because all of a sudden I may just show up at their hospital. I may just show up at their CBOCs, and we're going to talk about it, and we're going to make sure that our veterans are getting taken care of.

I'm not pie in the sky thinking I can wave my magic wand and make it happen. But I will tell you this, they're going to know who their Secretary is. They're going to know who their Secretary cares about. And it's that veteran that is in the system now, and that veteran that is to come, and that veteran that has went, gotten out and for some reason slipped through the cracks and does not know that they have benefits a lot. And if they choose to take those, then they're going to be there for them, or they're going to have a veteran's office that is waiting for them.

Chairman MORAN. I appreciate that to my point, what you're responding to, is that the assurance from the Department of Veterans Affairs that the problem has been solved often is not the circumstance of the field.

One of the things that this is in the management aspect, and then maybe this is an issue or a challenge because of employment agreements, but it is not infrequent in which we bring a specific instance in which bad behavior, malfeasance, malpractice, insubordination, a list could be long, of errors and mistakes made by someone at who works at the Department of Veterans Affairs in the field. And the response, ultimately, if you ever hear about what

happened to that person, that employee is, we transferred them to another hospital.

That can't be reassuring, shouldn't be reassuring to anyone. And maybe there's some impediment that makes it—can't be impossible—makes it difficult to actually fire someone. And the instances here are not like employee grievances. It's not like mismanagement in the sense of how do we get along here? These are egregious circumstances in which terrible things have happened to veterans. And this response is never the you're out of here, at least if that's the response. It rarely happens in the end.

So, my point, which I don't think I explained very well, but the point is there has to be a better disciplinary circumstance in those extreme cases other than you are transferred to another facility. And that is for the well-being, safety, and importance of the veterans who are served by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I couldn't agree with you more. The concept of failing up is not a concept that I abide by. I'm a military person. I'm someone who's also employed people outside the government as well, but failing up is not an option. You don't fail up. Because what we will do is I'll work within any agreements, employee agreements, collective bargaining, but if you're putting a veteran health and safety at harm, I will make sure the Department will get rid of you. And we are willing to do whatever it takes to do that.

Because here's the deal, and I don't think there's any Senator or Congressman who'd disagree. If that happens, you shouldn't be there. We'll do everything within the agreements to make sure their processes are followed, but I will not tolerate it. And that then, in turn, makes our better employees even better.

Chairman MORAN. You highlighted that point, and I was going to compliment you on it. That a culture, a sense of well-being of the employee, that it's a safe and valuable job, and that you're doing good work is hugely important to the success of the Department of Veterans Affairs. And if other employees see that some employees get away with bad behavior, it diminishes the value and joy of working there.

Mr. COLLINS. Senator, I agree. There's an old saying that I've ascribed to, there's two, ones that I look at and will be on my desk, if confirmed. And it says, "If it goes wrong, it's my fault." "If it's a little bit okay, it's everybody. And if it's right, it's everybody else's." So, we lift everybody up. But understand, when you have employees that come to work every day doing it right, and they feel like they have to carry a coworker along, after a while, they don't want to carry the coworker anymore. They just rose to the level. They go to that level. We're not going to tolerate that.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Collins, it's always my practice, and almost always my practice in a hearing, to give our witnesses the chance to take back, to admit a mistake, want to correct the record, to give a witness before the Committee the chance to restate or make clear something they felt like they didn't do in the first two rounds of questioning. Anything you'd like to add to the record today?

Mr. COLLINS. No, Senator. I just want to appreciate the time, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, Mr. King, and all who stayed and

come by. I've enjoyed the answers. I've enjoyed the questions. We're not always going to agree, but I'll guarantee you, I'll always listen. I'll always be a part, and to take this job very seriously to make sure that at the end of the day, our veterans are taken care of.

And, if anything, I'll say the only addition I'll have is I'm thankful for the ones sitting behind me. For my wife and my children, my father who's watching. And for those future employees, if I'm blessed enough to be confirmed by this body. Let the veterans of the VA know that we're coming to make a difference, and we're going to be there to support you.

Chairman MORAN. Mr. Collins, thank you. Let me see anything that we're missing. Okay. Each Member will have five legislative days to revise and extend their remarks. In addition, any Member who would like to send a question for the record to Congressman Collins should do so. Well, I don't know why we say as soon as possible, we actually need it by the end of business today.

We have an executive session of this Committee scheduled for Thursday. And so, if there's something that you want to make sure that has not been asked or answered by a Member of the Committee, we need you, Mr. Collins, so that our process can continue with the consideration of your nomination. We need you to respond immediately.

Mr. COLLINS. Yes, sir.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I would just join, Mr. Chairman, and thanking you for the hearing, and thanking Congressman Collins for your testimony here today, which I think has been very frank, and forthright, and very helpful to us. And really appreciate your candor, and look forward to a working relationship where we're always candid with each other. And, again, thank you for your service to our Nation.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal, thank you. I, again, look forward to working with you in the next two years on this Committee, and see if we can accomplish good things for those who serve our country. The meeting is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 12:44 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Nomination Material for

HON. DOUGLAS A. COLLINS

Opening Statement of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins
As Prepared for Delivery
Jan. 21, 2025

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, distinguished members of the committee, I'm honored to sit before you as the nominee to be America's next secretary of Veterans Affairs, and today I hope to earn your support.

I would like to thank President Trump for my nomination and his confidence in me. I am privileged to be joined by my family – my wife, Lisa, and my children, Jordan and Cameron. Not able to make it today are my son, Copelan, and my father.

America is the greatest nation on Earth precisely because of the veterans willing to step forward and defend the freedoms we hold so dear. Throughout my two decades in the military, I've witnessed this firsthand as I've served with some of the finest men and women our nation has to offer.

In addition to being a Navy veteran, I am an Air Force Reserve colonel and chaplain. The chaplaincy has taught me that leadership is about more than rank. It's about listening, having a servant's heart, motivating people and setting a good example for others to follow. If confirmed, that is the approach I will bring to VA.

I'm an Iraq-war veteran. I understand the issues many veterans face because they've impacted me or those with whom I've served.

As a military chaplain, I have years of experience serving others with empathy and kindness.

And as a longtime congressman and attorney, I know the federal government and I have the policy background to solve complex problems, cut through red tape and get things done for those who have worn the uniform.

Over eight years in Congress, I helped champion bipartisan legislation like the First Step Act, the Music Modernization Act and the Defending Trade Secrets Act. I helped scores of veterans solve their VA problems, and I will put that expertise to work making the department more user-friendly, so veterans won't need outside help to navigate the department's bureaucracy.

I have tremendous respect for this committee and its members.

This is one of the most bipartisan committees in Congress. And when it comes to VA, there are many areas where we all agree. For instance:

We agree that delivering timely access to care and benefits for every eligible veteran is job one at VA.

We agree we must instill at VA a lasting culture of caring, customer service and accountability.

And we agree we must do more to improve outreach to our most vulnerable veterans – those at risk of suicide or homelessness.

These are some of President Trump's top priorities for the department, and thanks to the hard work of this committee and a bipartisan majority of Congress, VA already has many of the tools it needs to succeed.

The bipartisan MISSION Act, which President Trump championed and 92 senators voted for, revolutionized VA health care. It's centered on a simple premise: providing veterans the health care they have earned when and how its most convenient for the veteran. I was proud to vote for the MISSION act, and if confirmed, I will continue implementing it to provide Veterans with timely access to the care they have earned. To be clear: I want to make sure that if veterans want to receive their health care at a VA facility, they can do so. But I also want to ensure veterans have the health care choices they were promised in the MISSION Act.

The bipartisan VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, which President Trump championed and passed the Senate without dissent, gave VA the tools to become the most accountable government agency. I was proud to vote for this law, and if confirmed, I will ensure VA uses every tool at its disposal to fire anyone unworthy of serving America's veterans and reward the many outstanding VA employees who do a great job every day.

The bipartisan PACT Act provides vital health care and benefits to veterans exposed to burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic substances. I appreciate the work many of you did on this legislation, and we will make sure we get it right.

The MISSION Act, the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act and the PACT Act are three of the most important veterans laws in recent history. They received widespread bipartisan support because their focus is exactly where VA's focus should be: on veteran convenience and accountability for the department. Under President Trump, these principles will guide the department in tackling some of its toughest problems.

We will not shy away from challenges like homelessness and suicide prevention, electronic health record modernization, and shrinking the department's claims backlog. And we will not stop until we succeed on behalf of the men and women who have worn the uniform.

As a former congressman, I know success requires your help and support as well as that of your congressional colleagues. I want to strengthen VA so it works better for America's heroes, and I will embrace your oversight and seek your counsel as we work together to do just that.

I brought with me today this paracord bracelet and these dog tags, which symbolize for me the countless heroes with whom I've served. These men and women are my motivation for wanting to be the next VA secretary.

This is my vison for improving VA and the lives of America's veterans. President Trump supports the department and I 100% in accomplishing this mission, and today I hope to earn your support as well.

With that, I look forward to your questions.

Pre-Hearing Questions for Doug Collins, Presumptive Nominee to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
From Senator Jerry Moran
January 5, 2025

1. Please detail the professional and personal experiences that you believe have helped prepare you to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

If confirmed, the role of VA secretary will be a challenge for which I'm well prepared.

I'm an Air Force Reserve colonel and Iraq-War Veteran with more than 20 years' military experience. I understand the issues many of our veterans face in dealing with the VA; many of those issues have affected me or those with whom I've served.

I voted for the Veterans, Access, Choice and Accountability Act, I voted for the MISSION Act, I voted for the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act. These votes were informed by my own experience in the military and as a veteran, and also by the issues I helped scores of my veteran constituents solve when I was a member of Congress.
If confirmed, I will be the first military chaplain to serve as VA secretary, and I will put that unique experience to work on behalf of those who have worn the uniform.

2. What do you think are the most significant challenges facing VA?

I think solving VA's problems with electronic health record modernization, ending veteran homelessness and reducing veteran suicide are the most significant challenges facing the department.

3. If confirmed, what would your highest priorities be as Secretary and what would you intend to accomplish during your tenure?

If confirmed, my top three priorities would be:

- Delivering timely access to VA care and benefits for every eligible VA beneficiary and ensuring veterans have choices over their health care decisions, as promised in the MISSION Act.
- Solving VA's challenges with electronic health record modernization, inaccurate budgetary figures, and reducing the department's disability benefits compensation backlog.
- Ending veteran homelessness and reducing veteran suicide.

4. What do you think is the appropriate role of VA in an average veteran's life and, if confirmed, how would you work to improve outcomes among the veterans, caregivers, survivors, and others who use VA health care, benefits, and services?

VA's role is to provide veterans and VA beneficiaries with the care and benefits they have earned. With passage of The MISSION Act, the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act and the PACT Act, Congress has given VA many of the tools to improve veterans' outcomes and experiences. VA and its leaders need to implement these laws faithfully and utilize them effectively.

5. What do you see as the role of this Committee, specifically, and Congressional oversight, in general, and will you commit to providing timely and accurate responses to Congressional inquiries?

As a former member, I have great respect for Congress and the oversight work it does. In addition to the important casework services congressional offices provide, congressional oversight often serves as an early warning system to help spot potential issues before they grow into major challenges. If confirmed, I will work to make the department more precise, transparent and timely in its communications with Congress.

6. If confirmed, how would you make certain that the Committee is fully and promptly informed of, and consulted on, any emerging trends, issues, or developments at or impacting VA, including those that – due to practicality and delegation – didn't necessarily receive your sign off?

If confirmed, I will expect VA leaders to work through the department's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs to proactively communicate with SVAC and other relevant committees about such matters.

7. What do you see as the role of the VA Inspector General, the Government Accountability Office, and the Office of the Special Counsel and, if confirmed, will you commit to cooperating fully with these respective entities?

With respect to VA, these organizations are broadly charged with improving the department and its services to veterans by spotlighting problems, recommending solutions and monitoring VA's progress in achieving those solutions.

As ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee and a member of the House Oversight Committee, the work of GAO, OSC and various inspectors general informed my legislative oversight activities for many years. If confirmed, I look forward to working with these organizations to improve and strengthen VA and do what's best and most convenient for veterans and VA beneficiaries.

8. What is your view of artificial intelligence and what role, if any, do you think it could play in enhancing services and improving efficiency across VA?

I think there is great potential for VA to use AI to automate certain claims activities, drive innovation in health care, and identify efficiencies and fraud. If confirmed, I will task my senior leadership team to collaborate with the department's National Artificial Intelligence Institute in these and other areas.

9. What role do you think veteran choice and patient preference should play, if any, in the VA healthcare system and, if confirmed, how would you make certain that veterans are at the center of the health care decision-making process, including when it comes to determinations regarding best medical interest and community care?

I think veteran choice and convenience should be at the center of everything VA does. We need to make sure we know VA's patient base, listen to their needs, and give them the benefits and services that they want. I believe that if you follow the needs of the veteran and do what's best and most convenient for them, you're going to end up in the right place.

10. If confirmed, will you commit to working to make certain veterans in need of residential or inpatient mental health and addictions treatment are placed into this care quickly and at an accredited treatment facility of their choice?

Yes, as long as the veterans in question are eligible for such treatment. If I see any potential issues in this area after confirmation, I will communicate that to SVAC and other relevant committees.

11. If confirmed, how would you approach workforce management at VA, including ensuring high-performing employees are selected and quickly onboarded and poor performers are identified and appropriately held to account?

One of the things that deters people – particularly high-performing people – from working in the federal government is the lack of accountability. So, if confirmed, we're going to fix that by using the tools Congress gave us in the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act to make VA the most accountable agency in the entire federal government.

We're going to put the best possible leadership teams in place across VA and staff our hospitals and clinics with the most competent medical professionals available. And when employees or leaders aren't getting the job done, we will show them the door, rather than shuffling them from one facility to the next or keeping them on the payroll, as has often happened at VA in the past.

12. If confirmed, how would you increase coordination among, and reduce duplication between, the Veterans Health Administration, the Veterans Benefits Administration, and the National Cemetery Administration and improve communication and services to veterans, caregivers, dependents, and survivors?

If confirmed, I would task the deputy secretary to tackle this issue, with guidance to not just break down silos among the three administrations but also to come up with new ways the administrations can work together to provide more coordinated and convenient communications and services to veterans and beneficiaries.

On the communications front, I intend to lead by example by proactively communicating with Veterans on key issues. I will use TV, radio and other traditional media as well as emerging mediums like podcasts and social media.

I will review how communication is presently done in the department and identify improvements so all Veterans, regardless of their familiarity with technology, hear from VA. I think when we do this review, we may find additional opportunities to leverage faith-based organizations and other outside stakeholders to reach veterans who may not be familiar with what VA has to offer them.

13. If confirmed, how would you, in coordination with the Board of Veterans' Appeals, enhance the disability compensation process and ensure veterans and other beneficiaries have access to timely and high-quality disability exams, timely and accurate decisions from VA, and an improved appeals process?

If confirmed as secretary, I would task the Board of Veterans Appeals to collaborate with VBA and VHA to identify and remedy the most common issues resulting in inaccurate decisions as well as any deficiencies affecting the timeliness and quality of exams and decisions. This would improve overall claims processing accuracy and reduce the amount of appeals received.

14. If confirmed, how would you reduce barriers to VA care and benefits for veterans and other beneficiaries, including those who reside in rural or remote areas who may face unique challenges accessing VA facilities?

First, I think we need to do all we can to reach those eligible for VA benefits and services who aren't currently receiving them. To that end, I will review how communication is presently done in the department and identify improvements so all Veterans, regardless of their familiarity with technology, hear from VA.

When we do this review, we may find additional opportunities to leverage faith-based organizations and other outside stakeholders to reach veterans who may not be familiar with what VA has to offer them. I also plan to enlist ideas and best practices from members of Congress, as I know you face similar challenges communicating with rural constituents.

Beyond finding and reaching those who stand to benefit from VA's help, it's about making their ability to get that help as convenient as possible.

15. If confirmed, how would you address VA's systemic acquisition issues, which include cost and schedule overruns and poor performance?

This is an area where VA needs to take a multi-pronged approach. If confirmed, I will direct VA's Office of Acquisition, Logistics, and Construction to:

- Craft and implement a technology-driven procurement strategy that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and performance.
- Leverage emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, to enhance supply chain efficiency, reduce fraud, and improve cost forecasting.
- Collaborate with leaders across government and in the private sector to identify any rules, regulations and/or laws that may be impeding efficiency, with the goal of working with Congress and other stakeholders to reform the department's approach to acquisition.

16. If confirmed, what steps would you take to ensure that VA is a good steward of taxpayer dollars and to identify and eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse across the Department?

If confirmed, I would take a number of steps to minimize fraud and waste across the department, including soliciting recommendations from stakeholders like the inspector general, the Government Accountability Office and Veterans Service Organizations, and empowering VA employees to find efficiencies that don't jeopardize services to veterans.

In all instances, when we find efficiencies at VA, I will make sure they are used to further benefit veterans.

17. Recognizing that VA-related casework requests from veterans and their representatives make up a significant amount of the constituent casework workload in each Congressional office, if confirmed, how will you – working through the Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs – make VA more responsive to casework related inquiries and leverage such inquiries to identify opportunities to improve services to, and outcomes for, veterans and other beneficiaries across the VA enterprise?

This is an issue with which I'm well familiar. Over my eight years in Congress, a large portion of my constituent service requests were from veterans. People would come up to me when I was at the hardware store to tell me about their VA problems. This casework can often serve as an early warning system to help spot potential issues before they grow into major challenges. If confirmed, I will ensure casework is a major priority for VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs and that any lessons learned from this work are shared appropriately across the enterprise.

Pre-Hearing Questions for Presumptive-Nominee
The Honorable Douglas Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
From Senator Richard Blumenthal

1. **What are your top three specific and measurable goals if confirmed as Secretary of Veterans Affairs and how would you achieve them?**

   My three goals are:
   - Delivering timely access to VA care and benefits for every eligible VA beneficiary and ensuring veterans have choices over their health care decisions, as promised in the MISSION Act.
   - Solving VA's challenges with electronic health record modernization, inaccurate budgetary figures, and reducing the department's disability benefits compensation backlog.
   - Ending veteran homelessness in America and reducing veteran suicide.

   If confirmed, I will achieve these goals by putting in place excellent leaders, surrounding them with effective teams, and ensuring programs are properly supervised, resourced and accountable. As we navigate these issues, I will solicit feedback and advice from Congress, Veterans Service Organizations and other trusted stakeholders.

2. **What do you believe will be the biggest challenges VA faces during the next Administration?**

   I think solving VA's problems with electronic health record modernization, ending veteran homelessness and reducing veteran suicide will be the biggest challenges.

3. **Have you spoken to the President-elect about the type of individuals you want on your leadership team? What will be your role in selecting the team who will help lead the Department?**

   My goal is to recruit a leadership team that brings a broad array of public-and-private sector experience that we will harness to improve the department and the lives of America's veterans. If confirmed, my team will follow the needs of the veteran and work with Congress and stakeholders inside and outside government to do what's best and most convenient for veterans and VA beneficiaries.

4. **How do you anticipate building and maintaining a positive relationship with the Department's Inspector General? What have been your previous dealings with Inspectors General?**

   As ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee and a member of the House Oversight Committee, the work of various inspectors general informed my legislative oversight activities for many years. If confirmed, I look forward to working with the department's inspector general to improve and strengthen VA and do what's best and most convenient for veterans and VA beneficiaries.

5. **Without getting into your specific medical history or information, as a veteran, have you used a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) service, benefit, or program? If so, what was your experience with accessing those services?**

   I was able to use the Post-9/11 GI Bill to help pay for my son's college. It was a positive experience.

6. **What would you do ensure Congressional oversight requests receive thorough responses from VA within a reasonable timeframe?**

As a former member, I have great respect for Congress and the important oversight work it does. If confirmed, I will work to make the department more transparent and timely in its communications with Congress.

7. **Since the President-elect announced his intent to nominate you as Secretary of Veterans Affairs, have you met with Veterans and Military Service Organizations (VSOs/MSOs), and other stakeholders? Please describe the VSOs and MSOs you have met with. Please give specific examples of how you anticipate involving VSOs, MSOs, and other stakeholders in informing decisions you make on behalf of the Department.**

   Out of the utmost respect for the Senate and its constitutional responsibility, I have not met with any VSOs, MSOs, or stakeholder groups since my nomination. If confirmed, I look forward to regularly meeting with VSO leaders to solicit advice and counsel on improving VA and the services it provides. Additionally, I hope to partner with VSOs to educate their members on the many benefits and services that may be available to them through the department.

8. **If confirmed, do you commit to full compliance with all applicable provisions of the Hatch Act and related statutes, regulations, and ethics policies of the Department as it relates to separation of partisan activities from your official duties and functions as Secretary and all related matters that fall within the purview of the Hatch Act and VA policies? Will you commit to taking Hatch Act training within the first month of assuming office and requiring any other Trump Administration political appointees, whether in Senate-confirmed positions or not, to also do so within that same timeframe?**

   Yes.

9. **If confirmed, how will you work with employee unions? Do you believe they play an important role in bridging communication between VA employees and management? What is your experience in dealing with unions or employees who have collective bargaining rights?**

   Management bears the ultimate responsibility for communicating with employees, and I dealt with union members and leaders throughout my congressional career. Additionally, when I was in high school and college, I was a member of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union.

   I will look forward to working with union leadership to provide excellent service to the veterans we are charged with serving while maintaining a great workplace for VA employees.

10. **What is your view of the role of whistleblowers? If confirmed, will you encourage whistleblowing by the Department's employees? Please explain. How do you plan to deal with incidents of senior leader misconduct to include whistleblower retaliation and partner with VA's Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection?**

    Whistleblowers play an important role in exposing problems, particularly at large organizations, such as VA. If confirmed, I will not tolerate whistleblower retaliation and will encourage all employees to be open and honest with their leaders and peers about the challenges VA faces, so we can overcome them and better serve veterans. If confirmed, I will appoint an outstanding professional to lead VA's Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection and will work with the office as specified by the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act.

11. **If confirmed, will you commit to making data public, including the Monday morning workload report, wait times by medical facility and wait times for community care?**

If confirmed, I will commit to transparency.

12. **After you were nominated, you posted on social media on November 14, 2024, that you would be focused on "cut[ting] regulations in the VA" and rooting out "corruption". Many regulations are promulgated at Congress' direction. In addition, the discussed DOGE "advisory group" proposed to be led by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy has indicated a desire to cut "smothering" regulations.**
    a) **Please provide examples of VA regulations you think need to be cut?**
    b) **Have you been informed if you will have a formal role in reviewing DOGE proposals before they are published?**
    c) **How do you anticipate collaborating with Mr. Musk and Mr. Ramaswamy?**
    d) **If the DOGE group proposes a policy change that impacts VA that you disagree with, who will be the final decision-maker?**
    e) **Do you anticipate being involved in all communications related to VA with Mr. Musk, Mr. Ramaswamy, and President Trump?**
    f) **If you need to communicate with Mr. Musk and Mr. Ramaswamy on official VA matters or topics that impact VA, will those communications be done using official government devices?**
    g) **Please review the publicly available Government Accountability Office report entitled: *Private Citizens' Involvement in Decision-Making at the Department of Veterans Affairs: Information on the Purpose, Scope, and Time Frames of Interactions between 2016 and 2018.* This report documented the troubling and inappropriate role of three private citizens who were not confirmed by the Senate, not a part of a formal advisory committee, and not part of a veterans service organization in decision-making at the Department. The decision-making was on several topics to include the $16 billion Electronic Health Record Management (EHRM) Program; the development of mobile applications to access health records; the implementation of a medical device registry summit; veterans' suicide prevention and mental health awareness efforts; and VA senior-level personnel decisions. If confirmed as Secretary, do you pledge to not replicate the informal and often inappropriate communications documented in this report and various Freedom of Information Act documents, and instead follow consultation and communication practices that are consistent with the law, ethics regulations, and transparency rules of the Executive Branch?**
    h) **Based on your comments in your November 14, 2024, social media post, please provide specific examples of corruption you want to address at VA? Please provide examples of how you would propose to root out that corruption.**

If confirmed, to the extent any VA regulations are getting in the way of veteran care and benefits, I will work across the government, with Congress and other stakeholders to eliminate or reform them. To the extent there is misconduct or corruption among VA employees, I will use all authorities available to VA to remove those engaging in such behavior. I will only support proposals that are in the best interests of veterans, and I will conduct government business on government devices.

13. **There are Supreme Court rulings and other related court cases and laws protecting members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Do you commit to following those rulings?**

a) **How will you ensure VA remains a welcoming place for LGBTQIA+ veterans and that they receive all of the benefits, health care, and other services they are entitled to under the law and regulations in a respectful manner?**
b) **Do you commit to continuing VA's efforts, in coordination with the Department of Defense, to upgrade the discharge status of veterans who were kicked out of the military because of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy?**
c) **Do you commit to leaving in place VHA Directive 1340, VHA Directive 1341(4) as amended on August 19, 2024, gender-affirming care for transgender veterans, and the staffing of LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinators (VCCs) at every facility?**
d) **More broadly, how will you consider the needs of minority veterans – including women veterans, racial/ethnic minority veterans, LGBTQIA+ veterans, Native American veterans, and others – and prioritize the reduction of disparities when allocating VA resources?**
e) **How do you plan to lead VA's diverse workforce given your previous public statements and positions on the LGBTQIA+ community?**

If confirmed, I will ensure that VA will be a welcoming place for all veterans and beneficiaries seeking benefits and services and follows all applicable laws passed by Congress with respect to benefits and services provided. I will make sure the VA workplace is a meritocracy, where all employees are treated fairly and afforded all of the protections to which they are entitled under the laws passed by Congress. The Department of Defense is responsible for determining discharge statuses, but I will work with DoD to ensure it has any needed VA support.

14. **Do you support the policy proposals for VA that were included in chapter 20 of Project 2025?**

I've not read Project 2025.

15. **If confirmed, will your views on religious liberty impact your work as Secretary? Please explain. Would you ever seek to require a veteran or their family to participate in religious activities as part of accessing a VA service or benefit or because they were living at VA facility such as a community living center?**

If confirmed, I will protect the rights to which all veterans are entitled under the law. As a military chaplain, I have specialized training in respecting the rights of those of all faiths – or no faith.

16. **Given your service as a pastor and military chaplain, if confirmed, what would your priorities be for the VA Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the National VA Chaplain Service?**

I think the VA Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships is an excellent vehicle for reaching veterans and beneficiaries who may not be familiar with what VA has to offer them, and if confirmed, I would look for that organization to continue this work. I would expect the National VA Chaplain Service to continue its mission of providing spiritual and religious care to veterans and family members.

17. **Since passage of the PACT Act in 2022, VA has experienced record-breaking hiring and retention across the enterprise. However, in 2024, VHA announced it would be slowing or pausing hiring to right-size and potentially address budgetary concerns in most circumstances.**

a) **Do you plan to increase, decrease, or maintain current staffing levels for VHA, the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA), and the rest of the Department?**
b) **Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, named co-leads of the proposed DOGE, have informally proposed to reduce or eliminate telework and conduct "mass headcount reductions" among federal employees. Were you consulted on those proposals? Would you push for an explicit exemption for VA's workforce from these proposals?**

If confirmed, I will analyze the staffing needs at the VA and advocate for what is best for ensuring veterans receive the best possible services.

President Trump has been very clear that he wants federal employees to show up to the office for work, and, if confirmed, I will do everything I can to make that happen.

For me, it's very simple: Veterans have to show up every day for work when they're serving our nation, and so do most VA medical employees. So I think it makes sense for the vast majority of VA's employees to show up every day for work when they're serving America's veterans.

18. **Outside of the Department of Defense, VA has the largest number of civilian employees of any Department in the federal government. What experience or background do you have in managing large teams and coordinating interdepartmental efforts?**

As ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee and a member of the House Oversight Committee, I managed congressional Republicans' oversight efforts for the entire Department of Justice and helped provide oversight for the entire federal government. Through that, I gained experience dealing with some of the nation's most complicated problems, agencies and bureaucracies. Additionally, I have more than two-decades of experience in the military, where I serve as a colonel in the Air Force Reserve and have participated in a variety of missions spanning the entire armed forces, including my 2008 deployment to Iraq. In my current military assignment at the Air Force Reserve Command Chaplain Office, I help oversee nearly 675 chaplains serving around the globe.

19. **In a November 11, 2024, media interview on Fox News, you made comments that appeared to reference VA's legal settlement with a category of employees disciplined using provisions of Section 714 of Public Law 115-141 (Section 714) and related matters.**

a) **Is that what your comments were in reference to?**
b) **Have you reviewed any publicly available rulings related to the settlement agreement VA entered into or information on the cost of the alternative remedy had VA not entered into the settlement?**
c) **Are you aware that several judicial bodies, administrative law judges, and arbitrators ruled in favor of the employees due to VA's improper implementation of this law during the first Trump Administration?**
d) **VA has taken adverse action against more than 45,000 employees from FY 2016-FY 2024, across three Administrations (Obama, Trump, Biden), which includes 5,307 through August 2024. Do you believe VA needs additional authorities to discipline employees? What analysis is that based on?**
e) **Do you plan to consider reinstating the use of the Section 714 authority or pursue a similar authority?**
    i. **If so, what would be your process to determine whether making changes are in the best interest of the Department and taxpayers?**

ii. **How do you plan to address the prior legal challenges to adverse actions taken via this authority and ensure they are not reversed as well as a comparison to the use of legally tested Title 5 authorities?**

f) **In July 2023, VA entered into a legal settlement agreement with American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) to "make whole" certain AFGE employees who were disciplined utilizing the authorities in Section 714. Do you plan to continue to honor this agreement?**

If confirmed as VA secretary, I will be the number one advocate for VA employees when they're doing their job. At the same time, I will hold them accountable when they fall short of the mission. The bipartisan VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, which passed the Senate without dissent, gave VA the tools to become the most accountable federal agency in all of government.

As a congressman, I was proud to vote for this law, and if confirmed as secretary, I will ensure that the department is using every tool at its disposal to remove any employees who are unworthy of serving America's veterans and reward the many outstanding VA employees who do a great job day in and day out.

20. **Throughout his 2024 campaign President-Elect Trump and various of his surrogates criticized efforts within government, the private sector, institutions of higher learning, and society at large, to support the diversity of workforce and celebrate Americans of all backgrounds. If confirmed as Secretary, you would lead a workforce of more than 450,000 – a third of whom are veterans, more than a third of whom are women, more than 10 percent have a disability – and representing a wide range of racial and ethnic groups that are also found in our military and society at large. This same diversity exists among the veterans VA serves.**

a) **How will you treat all of these employees and veterans with dignity and respect?**
b) **Do you believe diversity programs at VA need to be eliminated at VA? Which? Why?**
c) **How would you go about approaching this issue given President-Elect Trump's directive for change?**

If confirmed, I will make sure the VA workplace is a meritocracy, where all employees are treated fairly and afforded all of the protections to which they are entitled under the laws Congress has passed.

21. **VA should be the flagship medical care delivery system in the United States. Independent reviews have consistently ranked the quality of its care at or above that found in the private sector. As Secretary, what would you do differently than previous VA leadership to ensure it further strengthens that position? What specific actions would you take to make VA an employer of choice in the medical community given the intense competition in the labor market?**

One of the things that deters people – particularly high-performing people – from working in the federal government is the lack of accountability. So, if confirmed, we're going to fix that by using the tools Congress gave us in the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act to make VA the most accountable agency in the entire federal government.

We're going to put the best possible leadership teams in place across VA and staff our hospitals and clinics with the most competent medical professionals available. And when employees or leaders aren't getting the job done, we will show them the door, rather than shuffling them from one facility to the next or keeping them on the payroll, as has often happened at VA in the past.

22. **VA is required to conduct a review of its health care access standards at least once every three years and the next Triennial review is due June 2025. Do you intend to modify the current access standards that govern eligibility for community care?**

    If confirmed, my job will be to deliver veterans the best care and benefits as efficiently as possible. I want to make sure that if veterans want to receive their health care at a VA facility, they can do so. But I also want to ensure veterans have the health care choices and options they were promised in the MISSION Act.

    For me, it's always about the needs of veterans. So, if there are ways we can better meet their needs, we will work toward that, keeping Congress and stakeholders informed along the way.

23. **After a comprehensive review of Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregiver (PCAFC) regulations, VA published a proposed rule in December 2024, revising and expanding eligibility criteria for the program and further delaying discharges from PCAFC based on eligibility reassessments for an additional 18 months after the effective date of a final rule.**

    a) **Would you commit to reviewing the VA MISSION Act, the regulations that followed, public comments from members of Congress and stakeholders regarding the proposed rule, and resource and personnel requirements for PCAFC, and report to Congress within 100 days of confirmation providing information on how your administration intends to proceed with the rule and a timeline for publication of the final rule?**
    b) **If publication of the final rule is not anticipated before September 2025, do you intend to start discharging legacy applicants based on reassessments at that time?**

    If confirmed, I will review this issue and communicate my plan for handling it to SVAC and other relevant committees in a timely fashion. Creating the most benefit for the most veterans and caregivers possible under the law will guide my approach to this issue.

24. **In September 2022, VA published an interim final rule (IFR) that allows for abortion counseling to pregnant veterans and CHAMPVA beneficiaries, and abortions in cases of rape, incest, and life or health endangerment. VA published its final rule on this topic in March 2024, with no changes made from the IFR.**

    a) **If confirmed, will you continue to implement this final rule?**
    b) **Will you commit to upholding veteran privacy by refraining from publicizing any information on specific conditions which led veterans to receive care under this rule?**

    If confirmed, this is an issue we are going to look at to ensure the department is following the laws Congress has passed. We will always take appropriate actions to safeguard patient-privacy information consistent with the law.

25. **In March 2024, VA expanded eligibility for in-vitro fertilization (IVF) to eligible unmarried veterans, veterans in same-sex marriages, and veterans who are not able to produce their own gametes.**

    a) **If confirmed, will you commit to upholding this expanded IVF eligibility at VA?**
    b) **Would you support removing the burden of proof requiring veterans to link their infertility to a specific service injury or illness in order to qualify for IVF coverage?**

If confirmed, I will look into this issue and take direction from the president, who is very supportive of IVF.

26. **VA has recently made significant strides in tackling veterans homelessness including a general downward trend in homelessness since 2010 and meeting or exceeding its permanent housing goals for the past two years. Much of this success has been attributed to expanded authorities and funding increases since the COVID pandemic. However, the recent passage of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act marks a significant turning point for the VA Homeless Programs Office with expanded authorities for Grant and Per Diem and direct services for veterans through Medical Centers that will likely require even more staff and funding increases. How do you plan to advocate for appropriate staffing and funding to continue VA's success in the veterans homelessness space?**

    If confirmed, I will confer with the relevant VA leaders responsible for these issues and advocate to Congress for the appropriate resources and staff. And while we strive to get Veterans shelter, we also need to address the underlying issues that led to their homelessness, and we will work with our interagency partners at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor and Defense to do just that.

27. **Veterans and providers have continued to advocate for psychedelic therapies as an alternative method to treat certain mental health conditions, such as PTSD. VA has begun participating in clinical trials to examine these substances efficacy as a mental health treatment, and recently began funding their own research.**

    a) **Do you have any plans to change VA's current position on this research?**
    b) **Do you have any plans to expand or reduce access to these treatments if research indicates them to be beneficial treatment options?**

    I have no current plans to change VA's posture in this area. If I see any potential issues after confirmation, I will communicate that to SVAC and other relevant committees before making any changes.

28. **When the Department initially launched the Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM) Program at its first location in October of 2020, VA officials hailed the results as "flawless" and "the most expensive IT program in government history" and a great success. Since that time, as has been well documented in the public record to include VA Office of Inspector General and Government Accountability reports, media reporting, and dozens of hearings, the actual results have been found to be much different: cost overruns, veteran patient harm, reduced productivity and collections, system-wide crashes, poor contractor performance and oversight. Only after a years-long bipartisan congressionally-driven effort demanding VA to stop, regroup, and fix what was broken did VA finally listen and begin to make the necessary reforms.**

    a) **Given the wide-range of publicly information available to you, would describe the launch of EHRM and its deployment at the first five locations in Washington State, Ohio, and Oregon as a success? If so, please explain why.**
    b) **From a technical perspective, does VA need to use the same commercial EHR as the Department of Defense to achieve health record interoperability? If that is the case, how do all private and non-profit hospitals in the U.S. exchange health information when they all do not use the same commercial brand?**

c) **On December 20, 2024, VA announced it would exit its EHRM "reset" period, continue reforms to better serve veterans and VA clinical staff, and methodically move towards a spring 2026 deployment following readiness data, on-the-ground feedback, and the implementation of needed IT development and code changes agreed upon by VA and Oracle Health. If confirmed, do you commit to following VA's post "reset" plans, consistent with Congressional direction, that focus on prioritizing the health and safety of veterans, providing VA clinical staff the tools they need to deliver high quality health care, and protecting the taxpayer's investment through aggressive contractor oversight?**
d) **On December 17, 2024, VA proposed a rule (RIN 2900-AS25) entitled: "*Updates to Waiver of Charges for Copayments.*" If finalized, it would allow VA to waive the collections of medical copayments veterans may have accumulated, through no fault of their own, due to a departmental error or an error of a company on contract with VA. While VA has a current process for veterans to submit their own request for waivers, VA believes there is not a clear mechanism for the Department to initiate those waivers on behalf of the veteran. Among many incidents where this has come up, related to the EHRM Program, more than 20,000 veterans are at risk of receiving copayment bills that are several years old and due to problems with the Oracle Health EHR. If confirmed, will you commit to following through on this proposed rule, see that it is implemented and ensure veterans impacted by EHRM are held harmless for VA and its contractor's mistakes?**

Getting this right is imperative, so if confirmed, I'm going to put together a top-notch team, and we're going to sit down with leaders from Oracle, the Department of Defense and the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization office to figure this out. We will develop a comprehensive strategy for the way ahead that we will communicate to SVAC and other relevant committees. Patient safety will be the top priority and VA clinical staff will have what they need to ensure that.

If confirmed, I will look into the proposed copayment rule and related issues and communicate our plan for handling them to SVAC and other relevant committees.

29. **Funding for VA Major and Minor construction infrastructure has been a decades long problem at VA – for several administrations of both parties. In the first Trump Administration, a proposal was discussed by then-Secretary Wilkie to include $60-70 billion for VA infrastructure investments as part of the Administration's broader infrastructure legislative initiative. While that infrastructure proposal did not move forward, the need remains unchanged. The current estimated need for Major and Minor construction as described in VA's public budget materials is about $80 billion over 10 years or $8-10 billion a year. This is a bipartisan issue, a VSO priority, good for veterans and local economies as the construction supports jobs. And the longer we wait, the more expensive this work becomes.**

    a) **Can you provide me your perspective on the prioritizations of funding for medium to large scale medical facility modernizations and replacements as well as for cemeteries?**
    b) **If confirmed, do I have your commitment you will work with me and others in Congress to find more room in VA's budget for appropriate incremental increases to these accounts?**

    If confirmed, this is an issue I will study along with my team. But you have my commitment that, if confirmed, I will always advocate for VA to have the appropriate resources and infrastructure required to best serve veterans.

30. **The PACT Act codified a presumptive decision process authorizing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish additional presumptive conditions. How do you intend to approach decisions**

on whether to create new presumptions related to toxic exposures — not only for Agent Orange but for more recent issues such as burn pits and exposures related to service at K2?

If confirmed, I will ensure these decisions are guided by the laws Congress has passed and the best available medical evidence.

31. **The Biden Administration attempted to crack down on those assisting veterans with applying for benefits without accreditation from VA, but so far has yet to make a dent in this illegal activity. Will you commit to ensuring veterans don't have to pay for assistance with filing their initial claims?**

If confirmed, I commit to looking into this issue. We absolutely want to prevent any bad actors from taking advantage of veterans. But we also want to make sure veterans have choices, particularly if they aren't happy with whatever claims preparation options might be available to them for free. We talk a lot about providing veterans with choices and convenience, and I think we need to make every effort to do that in this instance while ensuring proper safeguards are in place.

32. **During President Trump's first term, OMB proposed to reduce disability compensation benefits for the most severely ill and injured veterans simply because they reached retirement age. This ill-conceived proposal was later denounced by then-Secretary Shulkin. What is your position on this issue?**

I will work with my partners in the administration to ensure veterans are able to receive their disability benefits.

33. **VA recently rolled out its new VA Servicing Purchase Program (VASP) under existing regulatory authority. This program is meant to help assist veterans who are behind on their mortgage payments. VA purchases their loans and sets their interest rates at 2.5%. Since the program opened almost 6,000 submissions have been processed with 4,519 being certified. The industry has responded well to the new program and with the foreclosure moratorium set to expire on December 31, 2024, many veterans are still waiting to be processed. As Secretary will you continue VASP and ensure it is fully funded in order to keep veterans in their current homes?**

I have no current plans to change VA's posture in this area. If I see any potential issues after confirmation, I will communicate that to SVAC and other relevant committees before making any changes.

34. **Do you support the PACT Act, specifically its approach of providing dedicated mandatory funding to pay for health care and benefits for toxic-exposed veterans? If you disagree with the Toxic Exposure Fund (TEF), how do you suggest these costs of war be funded, keeping in mind the long-standing challenges around discretionary caps are what prompted Appropriators to implement TEF in the first place?**

If confirmed, I will follow all applicable laws, including the PACT Act.

35. **Do you support the concept of shared services at the Department of Veterans Affairs similar to those outlined in then-Acting Director Vought April 26, 2019, memorandum entitled Centralized Mission Support Capabilities for the Federal Government?**

I'm not familiar with that memo.

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Ranking Member
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination Hearing of Douglas Collins
January 21, 2025

1. **Veterans suffer a disproportionately higher rate of suicide compared with non-veterans. An average of almost 18 veterans died by suicide each day in 2021 - a rate about 72 percent higher than the general adult population.**
    a. **What steps should VA take to help ensure it is actively addressing the high rate of suicide in the veteran population, including actions to improve its Veterans Crisis Line?**
    b. **How can VHA address mental health staffing challenges and ensure that it hires a sufficient number of mental health professionals to address the growing demand for such services?**

    This is a complex problem to which there are no easy solutions, but bringing these numbers down starts with doing all we can to reach the roughly 40 percent of decedents who haven't connected with VA. To better reach this population, if confirmed, I will convene a team and task them with identifying common identifying characteristics of this cohort and conducting targeted outreach to veterans matching this profile across the nation.

    As a first step toward improving the Veterans Crisis Line, I would solicit recommendations from stakeholders like the inspector general, the Government Accountability Office and Veterans Service Organizations, and empower VA employees to find efficiencies and improvements.

    With respect to mental health staffing, if confirmed, I will collect concrete data on vacancies and needs and report back to you in a timely fashion on those items and options for next steps.

2. **More than 73% of veteran suicides involve firearms, compared with 52% of all suicides nationwide. Safe firearm storage is an important method to disrupt access to lethal means in times of crisis. Do you have any thoughts on the importance of lethal means safety counseling in both clinical and nonclinical settings to reduce the number of firearm suicide deaths among veterans?**

    I support efforts to provide veterans with access to and counseling/training on these safety devices, provided VA takes care to respect veterans' Second Amendment rights.

3. **Last Congress, I helped lead the GUARD Act with Senator Boozman to re-establish criminal penalties for the illegal practice of assisting with the presentation, preparation, or prosecution of claims before the VA without proper accreditation by VA. In your pre-hearing questions you said you want veterans to have choices, "particularly if they aren't happy with whatever claims preparation options might be available for free."**
    a. **Do you think veterans should pay for access to VA?**
    b. **Will allowing for-profit organizations to file VA claims on behalf of veterans add to the current VA benefits backlog?**
    c. **Can you give some examples of what safeguards you think are appropriate to allow for-profit representation?**

    I don't think any veterans should have to pay for access to VA, but I do believe they should have alternatives if they aren't satisfied with the free services available to them. If confirmed, I will consult with relevant experts at the department and report back to you on possible safeguards.

4. **If confirmed, how would you work to improve access to VA health care and benefits to transitioning servicemembers and their families? How do you plan to coordinate with DOD to ensure transitioning servicemembers are receiving the services they are entitled to use?**

    As a first step, I would ensure VA and DOD are properly implementing the Solid Start program, which requires three phone contacts to veterans within the first year they leave the military as a way to familiarize them with VA benefits and services.

Secondly, I would work to improve coordination with state veteran affairs departments to reach veterans who may not be familiar with what VA has to offer.

Finally, I will redouble VA's efforts to establish an electronic health record integrated across all VA and DoD components. I'm going to put together a top-notch team, and we're going to sit down with leaders from Oracle, the Department of Defense and the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization office to figure this out. We will develop a comprehensive strategy for the way ahead that we will communicate to SVAC and other relevant committees. Patient safety will be the top priority and VA clinical staff will have what they need to ensure that.

5. **The GI Bill has been a critical resource for transitioning veterans for decades.**

   a. **What steps will you take to ensure that schools participating in GI Bill programs meet high standards of quality and accountability?**

   b. **How will you hold schools accountable for violating VA policies, engaging in deceptive marketing, or failing to meet minimum quality standards, and what consequences would you impose on repeat offenders?**

During President Trump's first term, the Under Secretary for Benefits, who had significant experience successfully implementing large programs, was made the single person responsible and accountable for the GI Bill's execution. As a result, the previous USB spent significant time with the project team and made key cross-VA decisions that kept the program running well.

If confirmed, I will find a similarly qualified USB who will be given this responsibility. As secretary, I will ensure the USB has the necessary support. I will personally review the program and report to the appropriate committees each quarter on our progress in keeping the GI Bill running smoothly and holding any bad actors accountable.

6. **VA health care is on GAO's High-Risk List and as of January 2025, GAO has about 100 recommendations related to these high-risk concerns that VA has not fully implemented, and additional efforts are needed to address the systemic challenges underlying these recommendations. What would your approach be to addressing GAO's VA health care high-risk concerns?**

With this issue, I think we need to go beyond communicating at the staff level and through public reports. So, if confirmed, I would designate a single VA senior leader to be accountable for reviewing, and if appropriate, implementing these recommendations. I will expect this leader and their team to regularly meet with GAO officials, formulate a plan of action with relevant timelines and metrics, and implement it as soon as possible.

Senator Patty Murray
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins
to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
Tuesday, January 21, 2025

Questions for Honorable Douglas A. Collins

1. **President Trump just signed an Executive Order that would effectively make all career Senior Executives into political appointees who can be fired for not showing sufficient loyalty to President Trump. How will this be implemented at VA – both in the field and in central office? Can you commit that you will not remove a senior executive simply because of their political beliefs?**

   If confirmed, I will ensure VA communicates the department's implementation plan for this particular EO to SVAC and other relevant committees.

   Additionally, I will ensure VA implements all executive orders in accordance with the laws passed by Congress. On my watch, the VA workplace will be a meritocracy, where all employees are treated fairly and afforded all of the protections to which they are entitled under the laws Congress has passed.

2. **How will President Trump's hiring freeze impact clinical care at VA? Do you commit to ensuring that clinicians will be exempt from this freeze in order to allow veterans to continue receiving timely care in VA facilities?**

   VA worked to secure certain hiring freeze exemptions in 2017 during the first Trump Administration, and if confirmed, I will ensure VA frontline health care workers and other essential positions have similar exemptions so that VA care and benefits continue uninterrupted.

3. **Will VA continue to provide gender affirming care to veterans who have earned this care through their service, including surgery, primary care, and mental health care?**

   I don't support providing gender reassignment surgeries at VA. If confirmed, that will not happen on my watch. With respect to other forms of gender-affirming care, this is an area we are going to review. Regardless of the aforementioned review, all eligible veterans will be welcome at VA and will receive all other benefits and services they've earned.

4. **In December, VA announced that it would expand caregiver support services to thousands more families in the coming years. What will you do to ensure these new rules are rolled out seamlessly to veterans and caregivers?**

   If confirmed, I will review this issue and communicate my plan for handling it to SVAC and other relevant committees in a timely fashion. Creating the most benefits for the most veterans and caregivers possible under the law will guide my approach to this issue.

5. **Studies have shown that disappointingly, Black veterans have their disability compensation claims granted less often than white veterans even when they have the same or similar evidence and service. What steps will you take to fix issues like that and make sure all veterans are treated fairly?**

   If confirmed, I will ensure VA is a welcoming place for all veterans and beneficiaries seeking benefits and services and that it follows all applicable laws passed by Congress with respect to benefits and services provided.

6. **American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians serve in the military at some of the highest rates of any group, but many Native veterans face significant barriers to VA care. What steps will you take to address this?**

   First, I think we need to do all we can to reach those eligible for VA benefits and services who either aren't currently receiving them or are facing barriers to care. To that end, I will review how communication is presently done in the department and identify improvements so all Veterans, regardless of geographic location or familiarity with technology, hear from VA.

   When we do this review, we may find additional opportunities to leverage faith-based organizations and other outside stakeholders to reach veterans who may not be familiar with what VA has to offer them. I also plan to enlist ideas and best practices from members of Congress, as I know you face similar challenges communicating with rural constituents.

   Beyond finding and reaching those who stand to benefit from VA's help, it's about making their ability to get that help as convenient as possible.

7. **What will you do to help Native veterans facing homelessness?**

   If confirmed, I will confer with the relevant leaders at VA and other government agencies responsible for these issues and advocate to Congress for the appropriate resources and staff. And while we strive to get Veterans shelter, we also need to address the underlying

issues that led to their homelessness, and we will work with our interagency partners at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor and Defense to do just that.

8. **How will you ensure that VA upholds and advances the federal trust responsibility to Tribes, and respects their rights to sovereignty and self-determination in its policies and actions?**

   Upholding the federal Indian trust responsibility is a moral and legal responsibility of our nation. If confirmed, I will work with leaders across VA, the Department of Interior and with tribal stakeholders to ensure VA meets these obligations.

Senator Dan Sullivan
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Hearing topic/title
Hearing date

Questions for Rep Doug Collins
Question 1:

I was pleased to see that your questionnaire stated that your priorities included addressing the inaccurate budget numbers. I am sure that you are following the VA debacle and their struggle to project an accurate budget. I, along with 16 others, including several people on this committee introduced the *Protecting Regular Order for Veterans Act of 2024* or the *PRO Veterans Act of 2024* last year. It was supposed to be included in the end of year package, but that agreement fell apart. The bill is simple, it requires quarterly in-person reports from the Secretary, since paper reports have been ignored or not submitted at all by the VA, as well as some language that limits the use of bonuses for central office leadership. We have gotten a lot of push back on this legislation from some people and a lot of support from others.

What will you do and do you support further accountability and transparency in the VA, including supporting the *PRO Vets Act*? Additionally, what are your plans to bring accurate budget numbers moving forward?

If confirmed, I will review the PRO Vets Act and provide relevant feedback. Additionally, if confirmed, one of my first acts will be to conduct an assessment and find out what's behind VA's struggles with providing accurate budget info.

My commitment to you is that we're going to make sure we have the correct information before we communicate it to SVAC and other relevant committees. And if we encounter an issue or need more time to get things right, we're going to communicate that as well.

I have too much respect for Congress and the important work it does to confuse you with conflicting information.

Question 2:

One of the topics we discussed in our meeting was cemetery issues in Alaksa. You committed to help resolve both of our cemetery issues in that meeting. JBER's veteran's cemetery requires that you go through the DoD base to get access to the cemetery. The rules for accessing the base change with each new base commander, leading to confusion and uncertainty. The family of the people buried there deserve stability and direct access.

Can you commit to working with DoD to resolve this issue and allow families to gain direct access to veterans buried in the cemetery on JBER?

Yes.

Question 3:

I was pleased to see in your questionnaire that you plan to work to address veteran homelessness. Our rates are extremely high in Alaksa. Can you tell us more about what you hope to do to address this issue? And how can you be intentional to include Alaska Natives in those policies?

If confirmed, I will confer with the relevant VA leaders responsible for these issues and consult with the Office of Management and Budget in formulating the President's Budget request. And while we strive to get veterans shelter, we also need to address the underlying issues that led to their homelessness, and we will work with our interagency partners at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor and Defense to understand those issues.

Question 4:

In your questionnaire, when asked about reducing barriers to VA care and rural areas, you stated that you wanted to leverage faith-based organizations as well as outside stakeholders. I applaud that answer and have been trying to the same thing. I believe my bill, LINC VA, would do that. Can you expand on the importance of prioritizing partners outside the VA?

My goal is to bring as many eligible veterans and beneficiaries as possible into the VA system. If confirmed, I have a number of plans to improve VA's direct outreach efforts, but VA can reach many more people by collaborating with outside organizations, including state departments of veteran affairs, veteran service organizations and other stakeholders.

Question 5:

I want to share a little Alaskan history with you. When I joined the Senate, the VA was falling apart in Alaska, part of the issue was the "VISN realignment" or process of reducing the 22 VISNs into 18, which started in 2015. Alaska lost its VISN and merged with other states to become VISN 20. When it lost its VISN, it lost its call center. This resulted in veterans being unable to get health care appointments and resulted in a huge failure in my state.

I brought then Secretary Shulkin to Alaska, after seeing everything in the state, he moved the call center back to Alaska, which helped a lot. However, a few years later, in an effort to save money, the VA moved the call center back out of Alaska. Now veterans in Ketchikan are being told to drive to Anchorage for their appointment again because the call centers in Washington state don't know Ketchikan is an island.

In addition to a lack of training for call center employees on the complexities of Alaksa, this has also led to a referral backlog. My staff gets monthly updates on the community care referral backlog in my state. As of January 6th we had 5,376 referrals in backlog. Which was down from 12,000 a year ago. To be clear, we have 30,000 veterans currently receiving

health benefits in the state, so 5,000 referrals is still a lot. Its 1/6 of the veterans receiving health care.

Its also important that you know that in the 2018 MISSION Act, I fought for a community care carve out for Alaska. In the MISSION Act states without a full-service VA hospital have direct access to community care, regardless of access standards. However, the call center employees in Washington state are not aware of this, and require the Alaskans to jump through hoops to schedule an appointment, which is against the law.

Will you commit to me to get a call center back in Alaska as soon as possible as well as work with me to move my bill, REP VA, which would permanently require a call center in Alaska?

If confirmed, I will look into this issue and communicate my plan for handling it to you in a timely fashion. Ensuring accessibility and convenience for Alaska veterans will guide my approach to this issue.

Question 6:

One of my top priorities in the veterans space is protecting our veterans who have been taken advantage of by unscrupulous trial lawyers. As you likely know, *the PACT Act* included the *Camp Lejeune Justic Act*, which was important legislation. This legislation did not include attorney fees caps. Since then, we have seen unscrupulous attorney charging up to 60% contingency fees. Can you commit to working with the Department of Justice, and the Department of Defense to ensure that veterans and employees who were exposed to contaminated water are not taken advantage of?

Yes. If confirmed, I will study this issue and communicate my findings to you in a timely manner.

Question 7:

Alaska Native and American Indian people have the highest per capita representation in the armed forces. Protecting the tribal sharing and reimbursement agreements and collaborative process in Alaska is an important part of the VA and Tribal partnership. Will you continue to support the Alaska Tribal Sharing and Reimbursement Agreements?

At this time, I have no current plans to change VA's posture in this area. If I see any potential issues after I am confirmed, I will communicate that to SVAC and other relevant committees before making any changes.

Question 8:

Traditional health is an important part of the work already being done in Alaska. Tribal providers would like to begin working with the VA on adding traditional healing to the tribal sharing agreements as Tribes already have staff that offer this service. Will the VA engage with Tribal providers to explore adding traditional health as a reimbursable service under the Agreements?

If confirmed, I will look into this issue and communicate my plan for handling it to you in a timely fashion.

Question 9:

The Tribal health system relies on a hub-and-spoke model to provide care. When higher level care is needed and is not available in a village or rural hub facility, patients must be flown to Anchorage or out-of-state for care. If multiple Tribal health organizations provide care to one patient on the same day, both should be able to be reimbursed. For instance, if a patient walks into a rural hospital with a head injury, and the doctors triage, review, and assess the injury, they should be entitled to reimbursement for doing so. If the doctors then determine the person needs to be sent to Anchorage for a head CT or other service not available at the rural hospital, a medevac may be called, and the person may then be seen in Anchorage on the same day. The Anchorage facility similarly deserves to be reimbursed for that care. The way the agreement stands now, only one of the two facilities can be reimbursed. Will you commit to reviewing this policy and traveling out to rural Alaska to see how this system operates for rural Alaskans?

Yes. I will study this issue and look forward to visiting Alaska.

Senator Mazie Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of Doug Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
January 21, 2025

Questions for Congressman Doug Collins

President Trump

1. **During the hearing, we spoke about your potential willingness to decline orders from the President that could be illegal. To follow up on that conversation, I would make the point that President Trump has a record of deciding things he supports are legal, and things he opposes are illegal. As someone who attended law school, has been a practicing attorney, and who served as a Member of Congress: do you agree that the legality of a law is ultimately decided by the courts?**

   Ultimately the courts determine legality, once the appellate process has run its course.

Community Care

1. **You have said you believe VA's system of care is "broken" and implied you support expanding Community Care. Community Care services often cost more than VHA-provided services. How does increasing VA costs by shifting more care to the community align with the President's stated goal of reducing government spending?**

   Providing veterans the choice to receive community care is not optional, it is required under the MISSION Act. President Trump has directed me to provide veterans with the best possible benefits and services, and if confirmed, that is what I will do.

2. **Why do you want to lead an organization you're trying to make obsolete through incremental privatization?**

   I don't support privatizing VA. I support strengthening it. I want to make sure that if veterans want to receive their health care at a VA facility, they can do so. But I also want to ensure veterans have the health care choices and options they were promised under the MISSION Act.

3. **Our nation's private healthcare system continues to face a years-long staffing crisis, and VA has similar issues when it comes to staffing critical roles. Do you expect private providers would be able to absorb the additional patients if VA were to stop providing certain services, or stop providing services in a particular location?**

   I think there will always be a need for both VA and non-VA care when it comes to providing the health care America's veterans have earned.

Fourth Mission

4. **VA has a "Fourth Mission" to improve our nation's preparedness for response to things like war, terrorism, and national emergencies – including natural disasters. As disasters due to climate change continue to grow in frequency, I am concerned that a greater shift toward Community Care would limit the Department's ability to fulfill this mission. Do you support the Department's Fourth Mission?**

   I support VA's Fourth Mission.

5. **What steps would you take to ensure VA's ability to continue to contribute to our response to natural disasters and other national emergencies?**

   As I understand, VA's ability to perform its fourth mission is a statutory requirement, and if confirmed, I will work with the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Emergency Management and across the department to ensure the department maintains its responsibilities under the law.

6. **VA's Fourth Mission also establishes the Department as the medical back-up system to the Department of Defense. Given the President-Elect's stated foreign policy goals, can you guarantee a greater emphasis on Community Care wouldn't undermine our military readiness in the event of conflict?**

   As I understand, VA's ability to perform its fourth mission is a statutory requirement, and if confirmed, I will work with the Veterans Health Administration's Office of Emergency Management and across the department to ensure the department maintains its responsibilities under the law.

LGBTQ+ Veterans and VA Employees

7. **During your time in the House, you regularly opposed rights for members of the LGBTQ+ community, including support for anti-trans legislation and vocal opposition to same-sex marriage. Under your leadership, will the Department provide the same level of care for LGBTQ+ veterans as cisgender, heterosexual veterans, given their equal sacrifice on behalf of our nation?**

   If confirmed, I will ensure that VA will be a welcoming place for all veterans and beneficiaries seeking benefits and services and follow all applicable laws passed by Congress with respect to benefits and services provided.

8. **How can LGBTQ+ veterans and VA employees trust your leadership of the Department?**

   If confirmed, I will ensure that VA will be a welcoming place for all veterans and beneficiaries seeking benefits and services and follow all applicable laws passed by Congress with respect to benefits and services provided. I will make sure the VA workplace is a meritocracy, where all employees are treated fairly and afforded all of the protections to which they are entitled under the laws passed by Congress.

9. **How will the President's proclamation that there are only "two genders" impact the Department's ability to care for trans and nonbinary veterans, all of whom have made the same sacrifices on behalf of our country as you have?**

   I don't support providing gender reassignment surgeries at VA. If confirmed, that will not happen on my watch. With respect to other forms of gender-affirming care, this is an area we are going to review. Regardless of the aforementioned review, all eligible veterans will be welcome at VA and will receive all other benefits and services they've earned.

Homelessness

10. **I have served on this committee for a decade and throughout that time, nominees for secretary – Republican and Democrat – have repeatedly said they plan to make meaningful progress toward ending veteran homelessness, and yet it continues to be an issue. What makes your pledge different?**

If confirmed, I will confer with the relevant VA leaders responsible for these issues and advocate to Congress for the appropriate resources and staff. And while we strive to get veterans shelter, we also need to address the underlying issues that led to their homelessness, and we will work with our interagency partners at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor and Defense to do just that.

11. **You wrote an op-ed criticizing the Biden Administration for a lack of action to reduce veteran homelessness, but the data released in November indicates veteran homelessness has reached an historic low. VA employs successful programs built on the evidence-based "housing first" model. Under your leadership, will VA continue to use housing-first policies?**

    I have no current plans to change VA's posture in this area.

12. **Your op-ed on homelessness focused entirely on the President-Elect's economic plans and did not address any of the complicated issues that can make homelessness a persistent, difficult issue to solve. How do the President's proposed economic policies help veterans dealing with PTSD or Substance Use Disorder?**

    High housing costs, to include the housing affordability crisis we saw under President Biden, are an obvious contributor to homelessness and can also lead to substance abuse. President Trump is working to deliver emergency price relief for Americans, including veterans.

13. **In your pre-hearing questions, you indicated support for ensuring the Department's homelessness programs are "properly…resourced." Will you commit to ensuring these programs aren't targeted for cuts, given the critical support they provide for your fellow veterans?**

    If confirmed, I will confer with the relevant VA leaders responsible for these issues and advocate to Congress for the appropriate resources and staff. And while we strive to get veterans shelter, we also need to address the underlying issues that led to their homelessness, and we will work with our interagency partners at the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor and Defense to do just that.

COFA Veterans

14. **For decades, citizens of the Freely Associated States (FAS) – Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands – have served in the U.S. military, then returned to the FAS and faced extensive barriers to adequately access VA health care benefits they earned. Many of these veterans do not utilize VA care because travel costs are so prohibitive. In order for a veteran in the FAS to access their benefits they must travel hundreds of miles and pay for their own airline travel, lodging, and transportation costs. The Compact of Free Association Amendments Act, signed into law in March 2024, includes provisions to address this longstanding issue. Under the new law, VA would no longer be restricted from providing services to veterans in the FAS, including reimbursing for veterans travel for care, and providing direct care through VA providers. The law requires the VA, beginning on the date of enactment in March 2024, to conduct robust outreach to and engage with each government of the FAS as part of the implementation process. The VA began monthly meetings with the FAS in the fall of 2024 after initial delays. If confirmed, will you commit to ensuring the VA moves expeditiously on implementation of the new law to ensure veterans residing in the FAS receive the proper care they deserve?**

If confirmed, I will review this law and communicate VA's plans for adhering to it to SVAC and other relevant committees.

15. Will you also commit to working with the bipartisan group of Members and Senators who worked tirelessly to ensure this provision of the Compacts is enacted in a way that is in line with the intent of the law?

Yes.

Sen. Cramer
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of Doug Collins to be Secretary for the Department of Veterans Affairs
January 21, 2025

Questions for Doug Collins, Nominee for Secretary

1. **For the last several years, I've worked with members of the North Dakota delegation, dedicated community stakeholders and veterans' organizations, on improvements to the Fargo National Cemetery. It's a fairly new cemetery, established as one of the first locations under the rural cemetery initiative in 2019, and we've come a long way since it's opening. Currently, we're working on a new veteran's memorial center, to be built and funded by the community, and turned over to the VA for operation into the future. Without good-faith collaboration, the VA bureaucracy could stand in the way of completing this community driven project in a timely fashion. Should you be confirmed, do you commit to getting briefed on this project, working with the local community on its completion, and keeping my office informed throughout the process?**

   I look forward to doing so, if confirmed.

2. **I've long been a supporter of exploring the use of Hyperbaric oxygen therapy HBOT to treat veterans battling posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI), as I often hear from veterans and patients who have found success with these treatment options. Getting this feedback from veterans is why I authored Section 702 of the Commander John Scott Hannon Veterans Mental Health Care Improvement Act, which among other things directed the VA to enter partnerships to explore HBOT and gather clinical trial-like data on its effectiveness. Despite evidence illustrating clinical benefit associated with HBOT, the VA has resisted these authorities and continues to resist utilizing these treatment options for veterans. Will you commit to working with me to advance HBOT research and ensure veterans battling PTSD and TBI have access to these innovative treatment options?**

   If confirmed, I will look into this issue and report back to you in a timely fashion on the status and options for next steps.

Senator Boozman
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of the Honorable Douglas Collins to Secretary of Veterans Affairs
January 21, 2025

Questions for Mr. Collins,

1. Since President Trump has placed great emphasis on providing Americans with viable career and technical education options, do you intend to use this authority to allow non-degree granting institutions with successful track records providing marketable career skills waivers from these requirements?

If confirmed, I will review this issue and communicate my plan for handling it to SVAC and other relevant committees in a timely fashion. Creating the most benefits for the most veterans and beneficiaries possible under the law will guide my approach to this issue.

2. Will you pledge to use this waiver authority to advance career and technical education opportunities for Veterans?

Please see response to question 1.

3. The Department proposed a rule on October 21, 2021, on clarifying the authority of State Approving Agencies jurisdiction. The proposed rule provides some valuable clarifications of the ability of these agencies to approve courses that combine online and in-person instruction as resident courses. Despite appearing on the OMB's unified agenda with anticipated completion dates, it remains unfinalized. What do you intend to do to see the Department finalizes this rulemaking soon?

If confirmed, I will look into this issue and report back to you in a timely fashion on the status and options for next steps.

4. The opioid crisis continues to be an issue across the country, but also within the veteran population. At the end of the month, we expect FDA to approve the first non-opioid pain alternative. This could be a game changer for the opioid crisis because if there is an effective alternative for opioids that is just as effective, but non-addictive, so many veterans could be helped. Once you become Secretary, it will be important for you to prioritize ensuring that veterans have access to nonopioid alternatives. No response is requested.

Senator Maggie Hassan
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins
to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
January 21, 2025

Questions for Congressman Collins

1. The *Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act* expands support for veterans and their caregivers, including by reducing the out-of-pocket costs that eligible veterans pay for in-home care, as well as increasing the availability of mental health resources for certain family caregivers. What are your plans to implement the Dole Act as quickly as possible, and will you work with this Committee on a bipartisan basis to continue prioritizing VA support for in-home care and caregivers?

If confirmed, I will review the Dole Act and communicate the department's implementation plans to SVAC and other relevant committees in a timely fashion. Creating the most benefits for the most veterans and caregivers possible under the law will guide my approach to this issue.

Additionally, I look forward to working on a bipartisan basis with SVAC members and those of other relevant committees to ensure caregivers and in-home care programs get the support and resources they are due under the law. If I see areas that require reform, adjustments or improvements, I will work with the committees of jurisdiction to address those as well.

Senator Duckworth
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of the Honorable Douglas A. Collins to be Secretary of Veterans Affairs
January 21, 2025

Questions for the Honorable Douglas A. Collins

1. **Before he was elected, President Trump promised the American people, "Your government will pay for, or your insurance company will be mandated to pay for, all costs associated with IVF treatment."**

   Veterans are at a higher risk of experiencing infertility than their civilian counterparts, an alarming and devastating reality that underscores the critical need to research and act.

   Our country must support Veterans by making sure they have timely access to the care and benefits they have earned through service and sacrifice – and that should include access to IVF services.

   I was pleased with Secretary Denis McDonough's March 2024 announcement that the VA would expand its IVF services to include eligible Veterans regardless of marital status, as well as Veterans using donated sperm or eggs, which is particularly monumental for Veterans who cannot produce their own sperm or eggs due to service-connected injuries and health conditions.

   Will you deliver on President Trump's promise to provide IVF coverage and keep the policies that your predecessor announced in place?

   If confirmed, I will look into this issue and take direction from the president, who as you noted, is very supportive of IVF.

UNITED STATES SENATE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ROOM 412 RUSSELL SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510
Telephone: (202) 224-9126

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEES

The Rules of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs require that a Presidential nominee whose nomination is referred to the Committee submit, on a form approved by the Committee, a sworn statement concerning his or her background and financial interests, including the financial interests of the nominee's spouse and children living in the nominee's household. The Committee form is in two parts:

(A) Information concerning the employment, education, and relevant background of the nominee, which is made public; and

(B) Information concerning the financial and other background of the nominee, which is made public only when the Committee determines that such information bears directly on the nominee's qualifications to hold the position to which the individual is nominated.

Committee action on a nomination, including hearings or a meeting to consider a motion to recommend confirmation, shall not be initiated until at least five days after the nominee submits this form unless the Chairman, with the concurrence of the Ranking Minority Member, waives the waiting period.
In order to assist the Committee in its consideration of nominations, the Committee requests that each nominee complete the attached Questionnaire for Presidential Nominees. The notarized original and any supplemental information should be delivered to:

Committee on Veterans' Affairs
United States Senate
Room 412, Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Attention: Chief Clerk

Revised January 2025

PART I: ALL OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS PART WILL BE MADE PUBLIC

1. Basic Biographical Information

Please provide the following information.

Position to Which You Have Been Nominated	
Name of Position	**Date of Nomination**
Secretary of Veterans Affairs	11/14/24

Current Legal Name			
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**
Douglas	Allen	Collins	

Addresses					
Residential Address (do not include street address)			**Office Address** (include street address)		
[redacted]			Street:		
City: Gainesville	State: GA	Zip: 30506	City:	State:	Zip:

Other Names Used						
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**	Check if Maiden Name	**Name Used From** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	**Name Used To** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
					Est ☐	Est ☐
					Est ☐	Est ☐

Birth Year and Place	
Year of Birth (Do not include month and day)	**Place of Birth**
1966	Gainesville GA

Marital Status					
Check All That Describe Your Current Situation:					
Never Married	**Married**	**Separated**	**Annulled**	**Divorced**	**Widowed**
☐	**XX**	☐	☐	☐	☐

Spouse's Name (current spouse only)			
Spouse's First Name	**Spouse's Middle Name**	**Spouse's Last Name**	**Spouse's Suffix**
Lisa	Jordan	Collins	

Spouse's Other Names Used (current spouse only)						
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**	Check if Maiden Name	**Name Used From** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	**Name Used To** (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
Lisa	Darlene	Jordan		XX	**02/65** ☐ **Est**	**06/88** ☐ **Est**
					☐ **Est**	☐ **Est**

Children's Names (if over 18)			
First Name	**Middle Name**	**Last Name**	**Suffix**
Jordan	**Taylor**	**Collins**	
Copelan	**Allen**	**Collins**	
Cameron	**Lawrence**	**Collins**	

2. Education

List all post-secondary schools attended.

Name of School	**Type of School** (vocational/technical/trade school, college/university/military college/ correspondence/distance/extension/online school)	**Date Began School** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Ended School** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still in school)	**Degree**	**Date Awarded**
North Georgia College	University	08/1984	Est Present 06/1988 □ □	BS	1988
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary	Seminary	08/1992	05/1996	MDiv	1996
John Marshall Law School Atlanta	Law School	08/2005	05/2008	JD	2008
		Est □	Est □ Present □		

3. Employment

(A) List all of your employment activities, including unemployment and self-employment. If the employment activity was military duty, list separate employment activity periods to show each change of military duty station. Do not list employment before your 18th birthday unless to provide a minimum of two years of employment history.

Type of Employment (Active Military Duty Station, National Guard/Reserve, USPHS Commissioned Corps, Other federal employment, State Government (Non-federal Employment), Self-employment, Unemployment, Federal Contractor, Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment), Other	**Name of Your Employer/ Assigned Duty Station**	**Most Recent Position Title/Rank**	**Location** (City and State only)	**Date Employment Began** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Employment Ended** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still employed)
Non-Government	Big Star Foods	Stock Clerk	Gainesville GA	June 1983 @	Est Present XX ☐ June 1988
Non-Government	Neotronics	Customer Service Rep	Gainesville GA	June 1988 @	May 1989 @
Unemployment				Est @ 2 weeks ☐	Est ☐
Non-Governmental	Lake Lanier Islands	Front Gate and Welcome Center Manager	Buford GA	Est June 1989 X	Est 1991 X
Non-Governmental	American Gauge	Sales Rep	Suwanee GA	1991 estimate	1992 Estimate
Non-Governmental	Zimmerman Evans	Sales Rep	Gainesville GA	1992 Estimate	1995 Estimate
Non-Governmental	Chicopee Baptist Church	Sr Pastor	Gainesville GA	Oct 1994 Estimate	July 2005 Estimate
Military Reserves	Navy	Chaplain Candidate	Gainesville, GA	August 1994 estimate	May 1996 Estimate
Military Reserves	Air Force	Chaplain	Moody AFB	March 2002 Est	August 2005 Est
Military Reserves	Air Force	Chaplain	Dobbins ARB	Sep 2005	Dec 2012 est

Self-Employment	Scrapbook Junction	Owner with Spouse	Gainesville GA	Sep 2003 est	May 2005 est
Military Reserves	Air Force	Chaplain	Robins AFB	Feb 2018	Present
State Government	GA House or Representatives	State Rep	Atlanta GA	Jan 2007	Jan 2013
Self-Employment	Collins and Csider	Partner	Gainesville GA	Feb 2009	Jan 2013
Federal Government	US House of Representatives	Congressman	Washington DC	Jan 2013	Jan 2021
Self-Employment	Collins Law	Lawyer	Gainesville GA	Feb 2021	Present
Self-Employment	Dogwood Strategies	Owner	Gainesville GA	Jan 2021	Present

(B) List any advisory, consultative, honorary or other part-time service or positions with federal, state, or local governments, not listed elsewhere.

Name of Government Entity	**Name of Position**	**Date Service Began** (month/year) (check box if estimate)	**Date Service Ended** (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still serving)
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐
		Est ☐	Est ☐ Present ☐

4. Honors and Awards

List all scholarships, fellowships, honorary degrees, civilian service citations, military medals, academic or professional honors, honorary society memberships and any other special recognition for outstanding service or achievement.

I received numerous awards over the course of my legislative career. I have not catalogued all of these recognitions, but one I am particularly proud of is the 2019 Allegheny College Prize for Civility in Public Life, which I received along with Rep. Hakeem Jeffries for our "collaborative work toward criminal justice reform, which resulted in passage of the bipartisan First Step Act."

My official military awards and decorations are as follows:

Meritorious Service Medal with 3 Oak Cluster
Air and Space Commendation Medal with 1 Oak Cluster
Air and Space Achievement Medal
Meritorious Unit Award
Air and Space Outstanding Unit with 1 Oak Leaf Cluster
National Defense Service Medal with 1 Service Star
Iraq Campaign Medal with 1 Service Star
Global War on Terrorism Service Medal
Air and Space Expeditionary Service Ribbon with Gold Border
Air and Space Longevity Service Award
Armed Forces Reserve Medal with 2 Hour Glass Devices and 1 M device
Air and Space Training Ribbon

5. Memberships

List all memberships held in professional, social, business, fraternal, scholarly, civic, charitable, or other organizations in the last ten years.

Unless relevant to your nomination, you do NOT need to include memberships in charitable organizations available to the public as a result of a tax-deductible donation of $1,000 or less, Parent-Teacher Associations, or other organizations connected to schools attended by your children, athletic clubs or teams, automobile support organizations (such as AAA), discounts clubs (such as Groupon or Sam's Club), or affinity memberships/consumer clubs (such as frequent flyer memberships).

Name of Organization	Dates of Your Membership (You may approximate)	Position(s) Held
Kiwanis	2024	None
American Legion	2009 to present Estimate	None
VFW	2009 to 2021 estimate	None

6. Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

Name of Office	Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only	Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made	Term of Service (if applicable)
GA State House	Elected	2007	2 years
US Congress	Elected	2012	2 years
US Senate	Candidate Only	2020	NA

(B) List any offices held in or services rendered to a political party or election committee during the last ten years that you have not listed elsewhere.

Name of Party/Election Committee	Office/Services Rendered	Responsibilities	Dates of Service

(C) Itemize all individual political contributions of $200 or more that you have made in the past five years to any individual, campaign organization, political party, political action committee, or similar entity. Please list each individual contribution and not the total amount contributed to the person or entity during the year.

Name of Recipient	Amount	Year of Contribution
Drew Echols for State Senate	500.00	2024

7. Publications

List the titles, publishers and dates of books, articles, reports or other published materials that you have written, including articles or blog posts published on the Internet.

I have been a public figure and frequent media commentator since 2007, authoring numerous articles, columns, etc., over the years in my capacity as a state legislator, congressman, political candidate and private citizen.

Title	Publisher	Date(s) of Publication
The Clock and The Calendar	Post Hill	2021

8. Public Statements

(A) List any testimony, official statements or other communications, including those made on the Internet including on social media or other digital content sites, relating to matters of public policy that you have issued or provided or that others presented on your behalf to public bodies or officials.

(B) List any speeches or talks delivered by you, including commencement speeches, remarks, lectures, panel discussions, conferences, political speeches, and question-and-answer sessions. Include the dates and places where such speeches or talks were given.

(C) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

Regarding the above requests, I have been a public figure and frequent media commentator since 2007, making numerous remarks, speeches, public comments, etc., and participating in numerous media interviews over the years in my capacity as a state legislator, congressman, political candidate and private citizen.

9. Agreements or Arrangements

XX See OGE Form 278. (If, for your nomination, you have completed an OGE Form 278 Executive Branch Personnel Public Financial Disclosure Report, you may check the box here to complete this section and then proceed to the next section.)

As of the date of filing your OGE Form 278, report your agreements or arrangements for: (1) continuing participation in an employee benefit plan (e.g. pension, 401k, deferred compensation); (2) continuation of payment by a former employer (including severance payments); (3) leaves of absence; and (4) future employment.

Provide information regarding any agreements or arrangements you have concerning (1) future employment; (2) a leave of absence during your period of Government service; (3) continuation of payments by a former employer other than the United States Government; and (4) continuing participation in an employee welfare or benefit plan maintained by a former employer other than United States Government retirement benefits.

Status and Terms of Any Agreement or Arrangement	Parties	Date (month/year)

10. Lobbying

Have you ever registered as a lobbyist? If so, please indicate the state, federal, or local bodies with which you have registered (e.g., House, Senate, California Secretary of State).

YES,
Federal
YES
STATE
Colorado Sec of State

Oregon Sec of State
Kansas Sec of State
Tennessee Sec of State

None of the above registrations are active.

11. Testifying Before the Congress

(A) Do you agree to appear and testify before any duly constituted committee of the Congress upon the request of such Committee?
YES

(B) Do you agree to provide such information as is requested by such a committee in a timely and accurate manner?
YES

1/9/2025 SVAC Questionnaire Addendum

Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

Name of Office	Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only	Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made	Term of Service (if applicable)
GA State House	Elected	2006	2 years
GA State House	Elected	2008	2 years
GA State House	Elected	2010	2 years
US Congress	Elected	2012	2 years
US Congress	Elected	2014	2 years
US Congress	Elected	2016	2 years
US Congress	Elected	2018	2 years
US Senate	Candidate Only	2020	NA

Publications

List the titles, publishers and dates of books, articles, reports or other published materials that you have written, including articles or blog posts published on the Internet.

I have been a public figure and frequent media commentator since 2007, authoring numerous articles, columns, etc., over the years in my capacity as a state legislator, congressman, political

candidate and private citizen. I am not able to provide a comprehensive list of the above items because I do not have it and reconstructing it would not be logistically possible for me. The below list is not exhaustive.

Title	Publisher	Date(s) of Publication
The Clock and The Calendar	Post Hill	2021
The Doug Collins Podcast	Salem Podcast Network	2024
Doug Collins U.S. Congress Website Archive	Library of Congress	Accessed Jan. 2025
Vote Trump to support ending veteran homelessness	The Washington Times	Nov. 4, 2024
Biden's immigration crisis comes to Georgia	The Washington Times	Feb. 22, 2024
Bill would halt unnecessary licensing roadblocks for Georgia's military spouses	Savannah Morning News	Feb. 28, 2024
Cutting the Tax Burden On Hardworking Georgians	America First Policy Institute	Dec. 14, 2023
Judiciary Committee Press Release Archive (as Ranking Member) – Start/End	U.S. House of Representatives	Accessed, Jan. 2025
The Doug Collins Radio Show	WMLB AM	March 2021 – Oct./Nov. 2022
Congress must fix U.S. patent system	Atlanta Journal Constitution	Sept 22, 2023
Democrats' impeachment bumblings are damaging Congress' strongest check on the president	Los Angeles Times	Aug. 11, 2019

By Voting to Hold Barr in Contempt, Dems Defy Logic and Precedent	Fox News	May 8, 2019

Public Statements

(A) List any testimony, official statements or other communications, including those made on the Internet including on social media or other digital content sites, relating to matters of public policy that you have issued or provided or that others presented on your behalf to public bodies or officials.

(B) List any speeches or talks delivered by you, including commencement speeches, remarks, lectures, panel discussions, conferences, political speeches, and question-and-answer sessions. Include the dates and places where such speeches or talks were given.

(C) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

Regarding the above requests, I have been a public figure and frequent media commentator since 2007, making numerous remarks, speeches, public comments, etc., and participating in numerous media interviews over the years in my capacity as a state legislator, congressman, political candidate and private citizen. I am not able to provide a comprehensive list of the above items because I do not have it and reconstructing it would not be logistically possible for me. The below list is not exhaustive.

Title	Publisher	Date(s) of Publication
Archival footage	C-Span	Accessed, Jan. 2025
Instagram Feed	Instagram	
@CollinsforGA X Feed	X	
@RepDougCollins X Feed	X	

RepDougCollins YouTube	YouTube	
DougCollinsGeorgia Facebook Feed	Facebook	
Doug Collins LinkedIn Feed	LinkedIn	
Interview with Fox News	Fox News	May 29, 2023
Interview with Fox News	Fox News	Aug. 13, 2024
Interview with Fox News	Fox News	Aug. 2, 2020
Interview with Fox News	Fox News	Feb. 5, 2020
Interview with Fox News	Fox News	Sept. 25, 2020
Interview with NPR	NPR	Dec. 5, 2019
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	March 14, 2022
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Jan. 4, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	May 22, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Aug. 3, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Aug. 25, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Sept. 17, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Oct. 2, 2023
Interview with Newsmax	Newsmax	Jan. 1, 2024

Letters of Support

January 12, 2025

Dear Members of the U.S. Senate,

On behalf of America First Vets & First Responders Alliance Inc., also known as America First Vets or A1 Vets, I am honored to offer our unequivocal endorsement of former Congressman Doug Collins for the position of Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This endorsement reflects the collective voice of America First Veterans chapters across eight states, unified in our mission to advocate for and support the needs of our nation's veterans and first responders.

America First Vets is a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Organization dedicated to advancing policies and initiatives that prioritize the well-being of our nation's veterans and first responders. With active chapters spanning eight states, we proudly serve as a grassroots coalition of veterans, service members, and supporters who are committed to upholding the principles of accountability, transparency, and excellence in veteran care and advocacy. Through community-driven initiatives, policy advocacy, and direct support, we strive to ensure that those who have served our nation receive the recognition, care, and opportunities they have rightfully earned.

Former Congressman Doug Collins embodies the leadership qualities and vision that are essential for advancing the mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs. His distinguished career, marked by a steadfast commitment to public service, legislative acumen, and an unwavering dedication to our nation's servicemen and women, makes him uniquely qualified to lead this critical department. As a veteran of the United States Air Force and a passionate advocate for veteran causes during his tenure in Congress, Mr. Collins has consistently demonstrated an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by veterans and their families.

Mr. Collins's legislative accomplishments, including his advocacy for improved healthcare access, mental health support, and employment opportunities for veterans, align seamlessly with the goals of America First Vets. His proven ability to bridge partisan divides and deliver tangible results underscores his readiness to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs into a new era of efficiency, innovation, and accountability.

Doug Collins's leadership as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs would be transformative for our nation's veterans and their families. His vision for a veteran-centric approach, coupled with his deep respect for those who have served, ensures that the needs of our veteran community will remain at the forefront of national policy.

In conclusion, America First Vets & First Responders Alliance Inc. proudly endorses former Congressman Doug Collins for this vital role. We urge all stakeholders to support his candidacy, confident that his leadership will result in meaningful, lasting improvements for the millions of veterans who rely on the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We can provide any additional information or support necessary to further this recommendation.

Sincerely,

Jason G. Loughran
Chairman & New York Chapter President
America First Vets & First Responders Alliance Inc.
Website: www.americafirstvets.org

PRESS RELEASE
AMVETS National Headquarters
265 North Avenue
Washington, PA 15301
media@amvets.org

December 12, 2024

AMVETS Supports VA Nominee

American Veterans urge Senate to conduct a 'thorough but swift confirmation process'

WASHINGTON, D.C. (December 12, 2024) – AMVETS views former Congressman Doug Collins as a strong nominee to become the next secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

President-Elect Donald Trump announced Mr. Collins will be his nominee to lead the VA after the incoming administration is installed in January.

"After hearing from Representative Collins and the transition team senior staff, it is clear to AMVETS that he has a firm understanding of how important the VA and its polices are to veterans and their families," said AMVETS National Executive Director Joe Chenelly. "He has committed to safeguarding veterans' benefits and addressing the VA's key issues."

AMVETS applauds President-Elect Trump for nominating a Post-9/11 veteran who served in the Navy and the Air Force.

AMVETS calls for the U.S. Senate to conduct a thorough but swift confirmation process.

"The VA cannot afford a prolonged absence of a confirmed secretary," Chenelly said. "The VA will continue facing significant challenges in its vital work, needing its new leader to be confirmed to effectively lead as soon as possible."

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) continues to include management of VA healthcare and VA acquisition management on its list of "high risk" government operations.

"We cannot afford any lapse in leadership at the VA, especially at the secretary level," Chenelly said. "The transition between administrations naturally brings uncertainty, as polices are examined. Veterans and VA employees need the stability that comes with a confirmed secretary."

AMVETS looks forward to working with the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs through the confirmation process, and with Secretary Collins if confirmed.

AVALON
ACTION ALLIANCE

January 16, 2025

Chairman Jerry Moran
Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
521 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510

Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal
Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
706 Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Moran and Ranking Member Blumenthal:

We are writing to offer our strong endorsement of former Representative Doug Collins as President Donald J. Trump's nominee for the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. As an Air Force Reserve colonel, Iraq War veteran, and Navy veteran, Doug Collins brings decades of firsthand military experience and a deep understanding of the challenges facing our nation's heroes. We are excited to see a dedicated servicemember, chaplain, and statesman at the helm of the VA.

The Avalon Action Alliance is steadfast in its commitment to treating traumatic brain injury (TBI), reducing the negative mental health outcomes that often accompany them, including PTSD, anxiety, depression, suicidality, and substance abuse. By advocating for and investing in cutting-edge research and holistic care models, Avalon Action Alliance seeks to ensure that veterans receive the specialized support they need throughout their recovery journey. Our experience shows that treating multiple areas of the invisible wounds of war is critical to the healing and thriving of veterans.

A key component of the Avalon Action Alliance is our Warrior PATHH network, which delivers a transformative, peer-based, Posttraumatic Growth-focused program that has changed and saved the lives of more than 4,200 veterans since 2014. There are seven organizations that are delivering Warrior PATHH across the country: Boulder Crest Foundation, GratitudeAmerica, Camp Southern Ground, Big Red Barn Retreat, Travis Mills Foundation, Sheep Dog Impact Assistance, and Permission to Start Dreaming Foundation. Two of these organization are grantees of the VA's Staff Sergeant Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program, Boulder Crest and Permission to Start Dreaming Foundation.

Avalon's six TBI centers are using a neurorehabilitation program to treat veterans, and we have seen excellent results. Based on the results we are starting a prospective clinical trial to establish a standard of care to treat the lasting impact of concussions. Our TBI centers have evaluated over 2,000 veterans and have treated over 1,000 through our intensive outpatient program.

Warriors Heart is our substance abuse treatment partner, and they treat over 600 veterans a year suffering from chemical dependency. Run by a retired tier 1 operator, Warriors Heart has received wide recognition and a great reputation among veterans.

Our organizations believe that with Doug Collins at the helm, collaboration will flourish between government agencies, private partners, and nonprofit organizations. As a military chaplain, Collins has ministered to servicemembers' mental health and spiritual needs, equipping him to address these critical

issues. With Collins' leadership, we are hopeful that the needs of veterans living with TBI and mental health challenges are urgently addressed and that they receive the comprehensive treatment and resources they have earned.

Doug Collins has already received enthusiastic support from numerous respected veterans advocacy groups, including Wounded Warrior Project, AMVETS, and the Independence Fund—organizations that recognize the vital importance of having a VA Secretary who truly grasps the complexities of military service and post-service life.

During his eight years in Congress, Collins championed key bipartisan legislation that reflects his steadfast commitment to delivering timely access to care, improving customer service, and enhancing accountability within the VA. He has also personally assisted countless veterans — cutting through bureaucratic red tape and helping them secure the benefits they deserve.

Once again, we offer our congratulations and excitement for his appointment. We look forward to working closely with Secretary Collins and his team to ensure every veteran receives the top-notch care and support they have earned through their service. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Joe Brennan

Avalon Action Alliance



Josh Goldberg

Boulder Crest Foundation



Lance Nutt

Sheep Dog Impact Assistance



Marty Martinez

Big Red Barn Retreat



Michael Anthony

GratitudeAmerica



Mike Dobbs

Camp Southern Ground



Heather Labbe

Travis Mills Foundation



Leslie Mayne

Permission to Start Dreaming Foundation

BVA National Headquarters
info@bva.org

For Immediate Release

BVA Applauds Collins Nomination to Head VA, Urges Prompt Senate Confirmation

ALEXANDRIA, VA (January 10, 2025) – The Blinded Veterans Association (BVA), the only congressionally chartered Veterans Service Organization exclusively dedicated to serving the needs of our Nation's blind and low vision veterans, commends the nomination of Air Force Reserve Chaplain and former United States Congressman from Georgia Doug Collins as the next Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

"Through his extensive military service and an effective tenure in Congress, Doug Collins has demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the challenges confronting our nation's injured and ill veterans, and the skills to successfully navigate those challenges and resolve them," said National Executive Director Donald D. Overton, Jr. "We look forward to now working with a Post-9/11 veteran in the top position at VA who will be sensitive to and anxious to learn about the unique needs of our blind and low vision members and their families."

The Collins nomination, which requires confirmation by the U.S. Senate, was announced on November 14 by President-Elect Donald J. Trump. Collins served in Congress from 2013 to 2021, voting in favor of major veterans' bills on the House Floor that included the 2014 Choice Act, the 2017 VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act, and the 2018 Mission Act.

Collins served two years as a Navy Chaplain before joining the Air Force as a Chaplain after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Media reports following his nomination revealed a deployment to Balad Air Base in Iraq in 2008 with the 94th Airlift Wing, based in Dobbins, Georgia, where he served as an individual mobile augmentee to the Command Chaplain. He has most recently served as a Colonel in the Air Force Reserve.

VA provides disability compensation and pensions to 6.7 million veterans and family members while some 9 million veterans are enrolled in VA health care, the nation's largest integrated medical system.

"The sheer magnitude of the workings of VA and the issues currently facing the Department require an expeditious confirmation process for nominee Collins so that he can immediately hit the ground running," Overton said. "BVA strongly recommends that the Senate VA Committee and the full Senate give his nomination a high priority among the dozens of others on their agenda."

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Fletcher Gill
Chief Executive Officer
T. 202-735-5382
fletchergill@lukeswings.org

January 18th, 2025

Re: Endorsement for former Congressman Doug Collins – A force multiplier for Military Non-Profit Relationships with The Department of Veterans Affairs

Dear Members of the U.S. Senate,

On behalf of Luke's Wings Inc., I am honored to endorse former Congressman Doug Collins for the position of Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This recommendation reflects our deep respect for Doug's unwavering commitment to improving the lives of our nation's veterans and their families.

Luke's Wings is a nonprofit organization that has provided over 18,000 flights to reunite wounded, ill, and injured service members with their families during critical moments, including medical recoveries, hospice care, and major life events.

As an Air Force Reserve Colonel, Iraq War veteran, and former Congressman, Doug Collins possesses the leadership, compassion, and vision required to lead the VA. His firsthand understanding of veterans' challenges, combined with his legislative accomplishments, makes him uniquely qualified for this critical role. During his time in Congress, Doug championed key legislation like the VA MISSION Act, improving healthcare access and accountability—issues central to Luke's Wings' mission of reuniting our wounded, ill and injured service members with their families during recovery and in their times of need.

Doug's leadership extends beyond policy. As a military chaplain, he has ministered to service members with empathy and compassion. His vision for a veteran-centric VA—focused on timely care, mental health support, and outreach to vulnerable veterans—is exactly what our nation's heroes need.

Doug is more than a seasoned leader; he is a force multiplier for organizations like ours. His ability to connect with stakeholders and inspire collaboration will enhance efforts to provide critical services to wounded, ill, and injured service members. His unique blend of military service and policy expertise makes him the ideal candidate to lead the VA.

In conclusion, I strongly urge the Senate to confirm Doug Collins as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. His transformative leadership will ensure that the needs of our nation's heroes remain a national priority. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 202-735-5382 or fletchergill@lukeswings.org if you require further information or support regarding this recommendation.

Fletcher

DocuSigned by:
Fletcher Doud Gill Sr.
B6AF476727AA463...

Fletcher Doud Gill Sr.
Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder
Luke's Wings

www.militaryveteransadvocacy.org
(985) 641-1855
PO Box 5235, Slidell, Louisiana 70469-5235

December 3, 2024

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Incoming Chairman
Attn: David Shearman
Email: David_Shearman@vetaff.senate.gov
U. S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs
412 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Moran,

I am writing to express Military-Veterans Advocacy's strong support for Doug Collins as the next Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Having worked closely with Mr. Collins on veterans' issues over the years, I have found him to be a dedicated advocate for the well-being of those who have served our nation. His leadership and reasonable approach make him an ideal candidate to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs at this critical time.

Doug Collins has been a consistent and reliable supporter of veterans, and I have witnessed his steadfast commitment to ensuring they receive the best care and benefits possible. His advocacy was especially instrumental in the passage of the Blue Water Navy Veterans Act, and the Choice Act, I am confident he will bring the same dedication and urgency to ongoing issues, particularly those related to toxic exposure and related health concerns.

Mr. Collins' unique experience also makes him well-suited for the role. Having served in the U.S. Navy and as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force Reserve, Mr. Collins has a deep understanding of military life and the challenges veterans face. His deployment to Iraq, where he witnessed firsthand the effects of toxic exposure, post-traumatic stress, and traumatic brain injury, gives him a personal perspective on the issues that are so critical to the veteran community.

As both a military officer and a chaplain, Mr. Collins has shown time and again that he cares deeply about veterans' well-being. He has demonstrated compassion, leadership, and an unwavering commitment to fighting for the rights and needs of those who have served our country. His leadership at the VA would be invaluable as we continue to address critical issues facing veterans, including those related to toxic exposure and mental health.

We look forward to working with Mr. Collins over the next four years to support and improve the services provided to our nation's veterans. Thank you for your consideration of his nomination, and for your continued leadership on behalf of America's veterans.

Sincerely,

John B. Wells
Commander USN (ret)
Chairman

Cc: Samantha Gonzalez, Deputy Staff Director
Email: samantha_gonzalez@vetaff.senate.gov
Dahlia Melendez, Deputy Staff Director
Email: dahlia_melendrez@vetaff.senate.gov

January 13, 2025

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs

Dear Chair Moran and Senator Blumenthal:

The below signing veteran and military advocacy organizations applaud President-Elect Trump's nominations of The Honorable Doug Collins as Secretary of Veterans Affairs and The Honorable Paul Lawrence as Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs. We encourage the Committee to confirm these nominations and move them swiftly to the full Senate for a vote, when all due diligence requirements are met. We appreciate your leadership in ensuring these Department leaderships positions are confirmed so they can begin serving the veteran and military communities expeditiously on Inauguration Day of January 20, 2025.

We appreciate Representative Collins' military service, especially his reenlisting in the Reserve Component after the 9/11 attacks, and his combat-zone deployment to Iraq as a Chaplain in 2008. We also recognize his service on the Defense and Veterans Affairs Committees of the Georgia House of Representatives, and his strong advocacy for broad access to veterans health, newborn childcare, and oversight of VA executive personnel performance and awards while a Member of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Further, we have all worked with former Under Secretary Lawrence when he served as the Under Secretary Benefits and look forward to doing so again. We recognize his steadfast leadership in implementing the *Appeals Modernization Act of 2017* (AMA, P.L. 115-55), especially to simplify the potentially complicated process of navigating the three different appeal options under the AMA's reformed appeals processes. We are especially appreciative of his leadership when he recommended that the U.S. Government would not appeal the District Court of Northern California's November 2020 ruling in *Nehmer v. Department of Veterans Affairs*. This small group of Vietnam-era "Blue Water Navy" veterans were previously denied retroactive benefits, and the norm would be for the government to continue to appeal as far as possible.

We look forward to Representative Collins' hearing tomorrow, and hopefully Mr. Lawrence's hearing soon thereafter. The Committee's confirmation is the important first step in securing the full Senate's support in fulfilling its advice and consent requirements.

Very Respectfully,

National Defense Committee
Hunter Seven Foundation
Burn Pits 360
Wounded Paw Project
Mission Roll Call
Armed Forces Retirees Association
Heroes Athletic Association
Mission: POW/MIA
Gunt Style Foundation
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
Ranger Leadership Policy Center
American GI Forum
75th Ranger Regiment Association
Military Order of the Purple Heart
America's Warrior Partnership
WiseHealth/VeteranCaregivers.com
TREA: The Enlisted Association
Stronghold Freedom Foundation

Valor Mission Project, Inc.
5160 Tennyson Pkwy Suite 1000
Plano, TX 75024
Tax ID # 84-3354057

Dear Members of the U.S. Senate,

I am writing to express my strong support for former U.S. Representative Doug Collins as Secretary of Veterans Affairs. As the Executive Director of Valor Mission Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering veterans, and on behalf of our Board of Directors, we can confidently say that Doug's unique blend of military service, public leadership, and policy expertise makes him an ideal candidate to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Doug Collins is a veteran with over 20 years of military service, including time as an Air Force Reserve Colonel and an Iraq War veteran. His first-hand experience with the challenges veterans face both on and off of the battlefield, uniquely qualifies him to lead the VA and address its systemic issues.

Doug's legislative record speaks to his commitment to improving veterans' care, from supporting the Veterans, Access, Choice, and Accountability Act to the MISSION Act. His deep understanding of the department and its complexities, coupled with his personal experience in navigating the VA system, will allow him to drive real, meaningful reform.

As a military chaplain, Doug brings a unique perspective on veterans' mental health and the importance of compassionate care. He has shown time and again that he understands the struggles of our most vulnerable veterans, and I am confident that he will prioritize suicide prevention, mental wellness, homelessness, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and timely access to care.

Doug's bipartisan approach and track record of solving complex problems, both as a Congressman and an attorney, demonstrate his ability to lead the VA effectively. He will bring both the expertise and the empathy needed to address veterans' needs and improve the VA's services.

We look forward to working with Doug and support his commitment to make a positive difference for our nation's veterans.

Very Respectfully,

Jimmy Mac
Executive Director
Valor Mission Project, Inc.

Wounded Warrior Project Supports Collins Nomination

JACKSONVILLE, Fla., Jan. 3, 2025 /PRNewswire/ -- Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) congratulates former Rep. Doug Collins on his nomination as the 12th secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and looks forward to seeing him go through the nomination process as the 119th Congress kicks-off.

Collins is a colonel in the Air Force Reserve. His distinguished record of service included assignments with the 94th Airlift Wing and as an individual mobilization augmentee to the command chaplain at Robins Air Force Base, Georgia. In addition to his military service, Collins served in Congress from 2013 to 2021.



"Mr. Collins knows first-hand what service to our country means, and his experience serving in the military and Congress underscores his knowledge of the challenges veterans face and how our government can and should help them," WWP CEO Lt. Gen. (Ret.) Walt Piatt said. "He understands the solemn promise our country makes to its service members when they don the uniform."

If confirmed, WWP looks forward to closely working with Mr. Collins. The veterans nonprofit will continue to be a resourceful and knowledgeable partner to VA in providing the programs and services essential to effective transition back into civilian life for our nation's wounded, ill, and injured veterans and their families.

About Wounded Warrior Project

Since 2003, Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) has been meeting the growing needs of warriors, their families, and

SOURCE Wounded Warrior Project

For further information: -- Michael Nilsen, Communications Director, Government & Community Relations, mnilsen@woundedwarriorproject.org, 904.578.3437

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