

HEARING TO CONSIDER A PENDING NOMINATION

HEARING

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

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HEARING TO CONSIDER A PENDING NOMINATION

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2025

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

The Committee met, pursuant to notice, at 4:05 p.m., in Room SR-418, Russell Senate Office Building, Hon. Jerry Moran, Chairman of the Committee, presiding.

Present: Senators Moran, Tillis, Sullivan, Blackburn, Tuberville, Sheehy, Blumenthal, Hirono, Hassan, and King.

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

Chairman MORAN. The silence seems too oppressive to me and so we are going to start. Senator Blumenthal is on his way, and when he joins us he can make his opening statement.

The hearing will come to order. Good afternoon and thank you all for your presence here. We are here to consider the nomination for the VA Under Secretary for Benefits.

I want to remind us that tomorrow our Nation will take time to remember the Americans who died in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001, and the heroes who sacrificed their own lives trying to save others.

Twenty-four years later, September 11th is still a vivid and painful memory for many Americans, and especially for those who answered the call to serve our Nation in uniform following the attacks. To those who stood to defend our Nation in a moment of darkness, we thank you and we thank your families for the sacrifice that was made.

Post-9/11 veterans now represent 28 percent of the veteran population in America, and face the highest rate of service-connected disabilities among the entire veteran population. The timely delivery of benefits is crucial to supporting veterans and their loved ones after their service.

The Veterans Benefits Administration is charged with administering disability and pension benefits, education benefits, home loan benefits, military-to-civilian transition support services, survivor benefits, and other resources to veterans after they have taken off their uniform. The responsibility of the VA Under Secretary for Benefits is to make certain that veterans and their families receive quality benefits in a timely manner, as have been provided by law.

We have an experienced public servant, Dr. Karen Brazell, before us today as our nominee for this important position. She served in the Army and is a third-generation veteran. She understands the importance of an institution like VBA and its impact on lives of veterans and their families.

Since January of this year, the VA has reduced the backlog in disability benefit compensation claims by more than 37 percent. For fiscal year 2025, the VA is processing claims nearly 18 percent faster than they were in fiscal year 2024. I am pleased to see progress at the VBA, but as we always say, there is still much more that we need to do to better serve veterans, survivors, and VA beneficiaries.

If confirmed, that will be your duty, Doctor, to take upon that task. I look forward to hearing your plans and priorities this afternoon, and I appreciate you being here. I appreciate your willingness to serve. I appreciate your family members that have joined you, and the willingness for you all to take on a role, if confirmed.

I will yield to the Ranking Member upon his arrival, but I think we will proceed with your testimony.

Ah, I recognize Senator Blackburn to do so.

**INTRODUCTION BY HON. MARSHA BLACKBURN,
U.S. SENATOR FROM TENNESSEE**

Senator BLACKBURN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and indeed, it is an honor for me to introduce Dr. Karen Brazell, President Trump's nominee to serve as Under Secretary for Benefits at the Department of VA.

Dr. Brazell is a third-generation veteran who served in the U.S. Army before building a distinguished career in Federal service, including senior leadership roles at the VA, the Department of the Navy, the White House Military Office. She currently serves as Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins, leading efforts on acquisition reform, technology modernization, and enterprise planning to improve services for veterans. She also holds a doctorate in Strategic Leadership from Liberty University, with additional degrees in organizational management, computer science, and business administration.

The Veterans Benefits Administration is responsible for delivering over \$250 billion in benefits and services to veterans and their families. But VBA continues to face a growing claims backlog, which has left too many veterans waiting for the benefits that they have earned.

With more than 20 years of experience in government and the private sector, her extensive knowledge in Federal contracting, IT and acquisition reform, make her well suited to tackle this challenge and to modernize the systems that our veterans are relying on.

And Mr. Chairman, as we have talked so many times in this Committee, the fact that the systems are antiquated, that they are not up-to-date, that the processes that caseworkers follow are antiquated, we know that someone who is competent and capable is needed. Indeed she is, and I am pleased to support her nomination, and know that she will serve with integrity, with discipline, with a steadfast and unwavering dedication to our veterans.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN [Inaudible]. Raise your right hand, and let me ask you this question.

Do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony you are about to give before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Ms. BRAZELL. I do.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. You are now recognized for your testimony. Thank you.

STATEMENT OF KAREN L. BRAZELL, DSL, NOMINEE TO BE UNDER SECRETARY FOR BENEFITS, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Ms. BRAZELL. Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished Members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am honored to be considered for the role of Under Secretary of Benefits at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I want to thank President Trump for this nomination and Secretary Collins for his faith and confidence in me to lead one of the most consequential missions within the department. I am equally grateful to the Members of this Committee for your unwavering commitment to veterans and for considering my nomination.

This would be my second tour of duty, both at VA and with President Trump's administration, and I do not take lightly what that means. Leadership requires sacrifice, giving more than those you lead. In today's environment, volunteering for political service brings intense scrutiny, personal attacks, and disclosure of one's private matters. I have accepted those responsibilities because I believe there is no higher mission than serving our Nation's veterans.

My family's story makes this mission profoundly personal. I am a third-generation veteran. Both of my grandfathers served in wartime, one in World War I and the other in World War II. My father, a Vietnam veteran, served a 12-month deployment, and my husband of 40 years, First Sergeant (Retired) Kent Brazell, served in Operation Enduring Freedom. I continued that legacy as an enlisted woman in the United States Army. I know the rigorous preparations for deployment—the readiness checks, the long hours, and the responsibility of ensuring that you and your fellow soldiers are ready for whatever lies ahead.

Later, as a military spouse, I experienced deployment preparation from the other side, holding together a household, steadying children, and standing watch over the family so that Kent could focus on his mission abroad. Those dual perspectives, both in uniform and as a spouse, provided me with a profound understanding of servant leadership.

Kent is here with me today, along with our two daughters, Jamie and Jacquelin. And my 88-year-old mother, a proud U.S. Air Force veteran, and my father-in-law, an almost 89-year-old retired U.S. Air Force veteran, are watching this hearing, along with family and friends. Their presence reminds me that military service is just not my story; it is our family's story, a legacy of service and sacrifice across generations.

I used my VA education benefits to advance my career, gaining firsthand insight into how these programs empower veterans to transition successfully, a lived experience that will always guide my leadership. Over my 40-year career in both public and private sectors, I have worked to enhance veterans' access to the benefits they have earned. I proudly served 4 years on active duty, then spent the next 16 years supporting Kent's Army career as a military spouse, experiencing the sacrifice, resilience, and strength required not only by those who served, but also of their families. That perspective gives me a unique understanding of the human impact behind every VA policy.

In public sector, I have led the intersection of policy, technology, and veteran advocacy. As VA's Chief Acquisition Officer and Acting Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration, I managed a \$30 billion portfolio and a workforce of over 12,000 professionals. I expedited the Community Care Network contracts to expand private sector care and modernized benefits systems to streamline intake, scheduling, and monitoring, always with accountability, transparency, and trusted outcomes for veterans.

In private sector, I built on that experience by modernizing health IT and benefits delivery with technology companies. I deployed automation to accelerate claims intake, implemented real-time dashboards for oversight, and reduced backlogs that had kept veterans waiting too long for decisions. These innovations minimized errors and delivered more reliable outcomes for veterans and their families.

In every role, my focus has been to deliver by listening to veterans, elevating underserved voices, and empowering teams that never lost sight of the mission: putting veterans at the center of every decision, and ensuring the veterans—the benefits, they are delivered with dignity, efficiency, and urgency.

Thank you again to President Trump and Secretary Collins for entrusting me with this responsibility, and to the Members of this Committee for your trust and consideration. I look forward to your questions.

[The prepared statement of Ms. Brazell appears on page 31 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Thank you very much. Before we go to those questions, I am going to recognize Senator Blumenthal for his opening statement.

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

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. Thank you for being here, Dr. Brazell, and thank you for your service to our Nation, in uniform and as a military spouse, and to your husband, as well, whom we discussed when you came to visit me. Thank you for that visit.

You know, the VBA's core mission to provide world-class service and benefits to our Nation is something they deserve and need, and it cannot be accomplished without sufficient resources, both in money and in staff. The Trump administration inherited a VBA that was providing more benefits to more veterans than ever before, partly as a result of the PACT Act, which Senator Moran and

I and others on this Committee championed. For the past 8 months, we have seen, in effect, the workforce drastically cut, through hiring freezes and demoralizing initiatives like forced overtime, an end to collective bargaining for the vast majority of the Veterans Administration workforce, higher level reviews, veterans asking the VA to take a second look at their claim because the claims processor missed something or made an incorrect decision. Those reviews have increased by 21 percent.

I am going to put my full statement in the record, but let me just say that the mass exodus at VBA, about 50 percent of the VA's regional office directors, have opted to leave Federal service rather than implement the collective bargaining-busting practices and policies, are, in effect, undermining the ability of the VA to perform these essential functions. And it is not just the regional directors. More than 1,000 claims processors have opted to leave instead of dealing with unreasonable commutes to unsuitable workstations or forced overtime.

You have been a part of this administration. You have been a part of the policies and practices that have undermined the VA's ability to deliver health care and benefits. And many of these canceled contracts were directly under your purview. I know you have said you were not directly involved, but I am going to want to know exactly how you were involved in what has been done already by the VA.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

[The full opening statement of Senator Blumenthal appears on page 27 of the Appendix.]

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal, thank you.

Dr. Brazell, from your experience at the VA, do you have any concerns about the VBA's workplace culture, what you see as the biggest hurdles that VBA faces in successfully serving veterans and their dependents? What needs to change, if anything?

Ms. BRAZELL. Chairman Moran, thank you for that question. Just to be clear, I have not been involved in any of the VBA operations. That is not my area of oversight right now. But I do believe that we have got some challenges with culture. Any time a new leader comes in, we do not make changes right away. We assess what is working well and what is not working well. And I think it is important that we look at prioritizing claims modernization. And I say that from the aspect of having one foundational data object.

I have heard from veterans, even when I served before, "How come I have to give you guys my information over and over?" I think it is important that we have the veterans submit that, their discharge document, one time, and it is used across multiple systems.

I also think there is an opportunity to digitize forms. We have a VA form that is for the Notice of Beneficiary and Claimants. It is a 15-page form. The first 6 pages are instructions of how to fill out the next 9 pages. I think we could do better than what we have today for our veterans.

And we also need to leverage emergent technologies. I want to look at workforce strengthening. Once confirmed, I will assess and review any challenges and look for opportunities for improvement.

And then finally, veteran-centered reform, digital modernization of claims processing. I think it is important that we look at where we can leverage emergent technologies to reduce. We have a claims backlog right now of about 650,000, within compensation. And yes, we have done a great effort under this administration, reducing that by about 37 percent. But I do believe there are opportunities where we can actually modernize that process to be more transparent to the veteran.

But most importantly, any emergent technology we bring to the VA, we must have a human at the beginning and end of that process.

Chairman MORAN. What do you see as your impediments to accomplish what you just described as your goals?

Ms. BRAZELL. Chairman Moran, over the last almost 9 months, I think a lot of it is the culture. We have relied a lot in the VA on our contractors, but we need our contractors, because VA does not have all the experts. It needs to be a balanced approach. But we have got to have leaders who are willing to take risks. And I say those are calculated risks. Some people may misconstrue what I mean by risk, but leaderships ensure that their folks are uncomfortably comfortable, meaning as leaders we have to push our people to help them grow, to get them outside of the way they normally think.

I am going to bring an industry perspective, spending the last 4 years in industry, and really bringing more of those agile methodologies, encouraging them to take risks. But celebrating what we have learned from when we take risks.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you for your answer. One would think, in hearing you describe the form, that someone else previous to you would have decided this form makes no sense, it is unfair, and inappropriate for our veterans. Those things that linger trouble me, and of course, individuals' leadership matters.

I also would tell you that it seems to me that the VA may be siloed from the rest of the department, and even within the organization, within VBA may not necessarily talk to each other. This lack of communication, I think, can cause veterans to fall between the cracks, and I would be interested—I will not ask this as a question because my time is about to expire, and I have one specific I want to ask you, but I would ask you to look into this issue of how do you make the VBA part of an overall organization focused on veterans.

And I have a pet peeve. Mostly what I know about circumstances that veterans are in are what they tell me, what their emails tell me, what they tell my staff, and particularly the cases, the issues they bring to us to try to solve on their behalf. And I would love, not because I don't want to do the work—in fact, it is part of the most rewarding thing that most of us do—but it would be a great day in which it did not require a United States Senator to get the VA to do what needs to be done to care for an individual veteran.

One of my veterans in my hometown has raised this with me, and I have raised this with the previous leadership at the VA, and

it may seem like a minor thing. But the VA sends out, to veterans in Kansas and across the country, they receive notices to say that their claim is, quote, “ready for decision.” And a month goes by, and a month goes by, and a month goes by. It is a misleading statement. It is not ready for decision, or if it is, it is still not decided. And I would ask you to take some time and address this, if you are confirmed, and serve in that capacity. Veterans ought to know what to expect, and in this case we are misleading them about the circumstance they are in. And I would welcome any response to that.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, you bring up a good—excuse me, Chairman, you bring up a good point. I think it is important to be transparent, but we have to be also factual in our responses to the veterans. There is room for improvement in transparency, more outreach, more education, and there is also more opportunity for us to collaborate collectively with you and your staff to ensure that whatever information that we are disseminating to the veterans, that they understand and that we are not—I am looking for the right words.

Being on the other side, if I had a document that says, hey, your claim is ready for basically a decision, I am thinking I am going to get notification in the next few days. We need to be clear what that means. And that goes back to if we had a better—I would not better, but an improved claims processing, where the veteran actually saw where their claim was throughout that entire process.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you. When you visited me you said that you had not been involved in contract cancellations. Have you reviewed any specific contract that has been canceled?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, thank you again for taking the time to meet with me Monday afternoon. And as I have relayed to your staff, who I met with last week, and you on Monday, my role as Senior Advisor was to assess the Executive orders and ensure that they were followed without any disruption to veterans delivery.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So you have not reviewed any specific contract. Is that what you are testifying? Just a yes or no, because my time is limited. Have you reviewed any specific contracts that have been canceled—31,000 contracts canceled. Have you reviewed any of them?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, I believe it is only 2,500 contracts that have been terminated to date.

Senator BLUMENTHAL [continuing]. Whatever the number, have you reviewed any?

Ms. BRAZELL. I have reviewed some of those, yes.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. And have you reviewed the contract that was canceled to train VA staff implementing suicide prevention PACT Act and MISSION Act-mandated services?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, I do not recall that exact contract, and I will be happy to take that back to look at that for you.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Have you reviewed the one that maintains and operates VA Cancer Registry databases in various states—Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Alaska—that was canceled?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, I do not recall, and I will be happy to look into that one, following this hearing today.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Have you reviewed any of the contracts of your former employer, Science Application International Corporation?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, I have met the requirements of the law.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You have reviewed it, or not?

Ms. BRAZELL. I have met all the requirements of the law as it relates to my former employer.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So does that mean—it is a yes or no. Yes or no.

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, it is not a yes or no. I have met all the requirements of the law.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, just for the record, your former employer received \$70 million from the VA. No contracts canceled. So you can refuse to answer the question, which is what you are doing, but that is a fact.

Let me ask you, Dr. Brazell, do you support means-testing VA disability compensation benefits?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, if confirmed, I will do a full assessment and look into that program.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you support it?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. It is a recommendation made by the OMB Director, Russell Vought. He has proposed clawing back benefits from veterans to save money.

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Will you tell the veterans of America that you will oppose this kind of extreme, cruel measure?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, we will ensure that every veteran is provided the benefits they have earned, timely and accurately.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Do you support eliminating compensation payments to veterans rated 20 percent service-connected disability, disabled, or lower? Again, another proposal from OMB Director Vought.

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, we will ensure that all veterans are provided the benefits that they have earned.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. If you are confirmed are you going to change the way that disability benefits are calculated and ratings are determined?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, if confirmed, I will follow the law.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, I am not asking you whether you will follow the law. I am really disturbed by these answers to my questions. I cannot force you to be responsive, but I do not view that answer as responsive to my question.

Let me ask you, do you support the elimination of collective bargaining at the VA?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, that is under litigation, so I have no comment.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Well, you have been working for the Secretary. He has taken this action. And you are saying you cannot comment on it?

Ms. BRAZELL. That is correct.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Chairman MORAN. Senator Tuberville.

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

Senator TUBERVILLE. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Dr. Brazell, thank you for being here today, and your service, and your family's service. A lot of sacrifice from your father on down, so thank you.

If confirmed as Under Secretary of Benefits you will oversee the VA's fiduciary program. Unfortunately, this program has been riddled with fraud and abuse. I sometimes even wonder if the VA understands its purpose.

In your own words, can you describe the purpose of the VA's fiduciary program and your priorities?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, thank you for that question. My three principles, we will always put veterans first, we will follow the law, but we will ensure fiscal stewardship through accountability. And if confirmed, I will do a review of the current program and the state of our financials today. But most importantly, we will ensure that we have processes and procedures in place to mitigate fraud, waste, and abuse.

Senator TUBERVILLE. I think we are all still concerned about the legacy of the PACT Act and the lasting regulatory nightmare it created for the disability claims process. So if confirmed, how will you ensure deserving veterans receive their benefits swiftly while reducing regulations and receive the proper payments?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I think it is important that collectively we ensure that the veterans receive timely and accurate benefits, and if confirmed, I will do a full assessment of that program to ensure that veterans are afforded those benefits they have earned.

Senator TUBERVILLE. Under Secretary Collins' leadership we have seen record reductions in the backlog claims. In one month, the VA processed I think 300,000 ratings claims. Is that right? Have you heard anything about that?

Ms. BRAZELL. We have went from about 650,000 in compensation down to an inventory of about—excuse me, the inventory is about 650,000, and we are down to about 145,000 that they have processed recently.

Senator TUBERVILLE. How can we ensure that that continues? I mean, do we need any people, any more eyes on the books? How does that work?

Ms. BRAZELL. We had, through VERA, VSIP, and DRP, the voluntary departure of some of the folks. I believe we have lost about 1,400 in VBA, of which about 1,000 of those claims adjudicators. But what we have got to do is—it is my understanding is that they have currently looked internally for other folks who are looking to do, upskilling the workforce to put additional individuals on to reduce—continually to reduce that backlog.

Senator TUBERVILLE. In your testimony you stated, if confirmed, you would work to strengthen interagency relationships between

the DoD, DOL, Department of Ed, and SBA to improve coordination and data-sharing. Can you elaborate on how this would look in practice? How are you going to communicate with all these groups?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, it is important that we have the collaboration between all other departments and agencies and leverage their best practices. Within DoD, the Memorandum of Agreement, you know, that was signed by the DoD Secretary and Secretary Collins allows for more data-sharing. It also allows for us to really look at a more streamlined transition when it comes to our servicemembers departing the military, especially for their medical discharge exams.

Senator TUBERVILLE. The one thing that I hear most back in my State of Alabama from our VA and our veterans is communications, and I think if we can communicate better, we can solve a lot of these problems. Obviously, not all of them. But communication to my veterans, 400,000 back in Alabama, they are much needed of more talk, more organization, and more explanation of what is in front of them.

So thank you, and I look forward to voting for you. Thank you.

Ms. BRAZELL. Thank you.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Tuberville. Senator Hirono.

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

Senator HIRONO. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I ask the following two initial questions of all nominees before any of my committees to refer to their fitness to serve for the position to which you have been nominated. So I will ask you.

Since you became a legal adult, have you ever made unwanted requests for sexual favors or committed any verbal or physical harassment or assault of a sexual nature?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I have not.

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

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I have not.

Senator HIRONO. You noted that one of your responsibilities was to oversee the implementation of President Trump's Executive orders. Can you tell me what these Executive orders were that you were overseeing the implementation of?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, every Executive order that was applicable to the VA are the ones that we were responsible for implementing.

Senator HIRONO. I am asking for you to name them. Which Executive orders are we talking about?

Ms. BRAZELL. Reducing the fraud, waste, and abuse in Federal contracting. We have implemented—

Senator HIRONO. How about the Executive order releasing thousands of people from the VA workforce? Wasn't that an Executive order?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, we did not have a RIF, nor have we released anyone from the workforce. Individuals voluntarily left the VA through VERA, VSIP, and DRP.

Senator HIRONO. So really, Mr. Chairman, I would really like to know specifically what Executive orders the President issued relating to VA, and I would like to request the nominee to provide that information, very specifically.

So how many Executive orders—I mean, to say, oh yes, well, everybody should reduce waste and fraud, that is pretty broad. So I would like to know, was that the only Executive order you were asked to implement?

Ms. BRAZELL. No, Senator. I believe at the VA there were over, at least a dozen Executive orders.

Senator HIRONO. Good. Can you provide us with that list, please, very specific?

I commend you for your commitment to making sure that our veterans receive the benefits that they deserve and have earned, and I think your testimony was that there was a dramatic reduction in the claims backlog at the VA? Did that result in an increase in the number of requests for review of the claims decisions?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, are you specifically—I am not quite sure your question.

Senator HIRONO. So the claims backlog was dramatically reduced, so you made decisions based on—and I do not know what the numbers were, something like from 600,000 to 100,000, or you reduced the backlog by 100,000, or you reduced it to 100,000. Can you clarify for me?

Ms. BRAZELL. Well, the current inventory is about 650,000.

Senator HIRONO. Claims or backlog?

Ms. BRAZELL. Claims for compensation.

Senator HIRONO. Down to—what was it before it got to 600,000?

Ms. BRAZELL. It was over a million.

Senator HIRONO. So since you made the claims decisions and you reduced the backlog, when a claims decision is made, can't the veteran ask for a review of your decision?

Ms. BRAZELL. I believe they can.

Senator HIRONO. So when you reduce the claims by 400,000 or so, did the requests for review increase significantly?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I do not have that information, but I will provide that to you.

Senator HIRONO. Could you provide that? Thank you very much.

Ms. BRAZELL. Absolutely.

Senator HIRONO. My concern is that even if, on the one hand, you are reducing the claims backlog, on the other you are doing it so fast that the veterans are saying, "Wait a minute here. I don't think that was right." So I would like to know what those numbers are.

Then, you know, your goal is to make sure that our veterans get all the benefits they deserve. How many veterans are there in the United States?

Ms. BRAZELL. By the DoD count that we have, it is over 17 million.

Senator HIRONO. Seventeen million? Do you know what percentage of those veterans have access to veterans benefits?

Ms. BRAZELL. I believe right now the count of what we have enrolled in the VA is around 8 million.

Senator HIRONO. How many?

Ms. BRAZELL. Eight million, or over 8 million.

Senator HIRONO. So that means that there are thousands of veterans that have not accessed veteran services. So what is your plan to enable them to access services, to find out what you can do to help them?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, it starts with outreach. We have got to improve our outreach.

Senator HIRONO. Outreach how?

Ms. BRAZELL. We have got to be out there and talking to veterans. We have got to be out there introducing the VA, because there is going to be a handoff when they leave the DoD. They are going to be part of the VA family. We have to start early; discussing that transition, educating them on the benefits—

Senator HIRONO. Excuse me. I have been told, for the whole time that I have been on this Committee, that there are millions, literally, of veterans who do not get that kind of outreach, and we are always told by all of you that there is going to be outreach. How do you intend to do outreach when the numbers of people who are working for VA is going down? Secretary Collins was asked if there is a plan to reduce another 80,000 or so—we still do not have that plan—but how do you expect to increase your outreach if, at the same time, you do not have the people to do it?

Ms. BRAZELL. We have a great Veterans Experience Office, and we are going to leverage that Veterans Experience Office when they are out there at VSO events, with our community partners, with our internal and external stakeholders.

Senator HIRONO. Okay. One more question then. What is your goal for reaching out to the, what is it, 9 million veterans who are not accessing? Do you have a goal, like within one year you will want to reduce the number of people who are not having access to what? Do you have those goals?

Ms. BRAZELL. I do not have those specific goals today, but I think within the next year to 15 months is a probability that we could address extended outreach.

Senator HIRONO. Okay. Mr. Chairman, I would like to really know how successful the outreach efforts are. I mean, I commend you for doing that. We just need to have them succeed. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Dr. Brazell, you will make every effort to answer the Senator's questions as you get the information.

Ms. BRAZELL. Absolutely.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. Senator King.

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

Senator KING. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Doctor, I was a little puzzled by your non-answers to Senator Blumenthal on did you have any involvement whatsoever in the review of the contract of your former employer. And don't tell me you followed the law. I am asking you a straight-up question. Did you have anything to do whatsoever in the review of the contract of your former employer?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, I did not review the contracts of my former employer.

Senator KING. Did you have any involvement whatsoever in that process?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, I am not a contracting officer nor a contracting authority. I do not have that authority. Only a warranted contracting officer has the authority to award, modify, negotiate, or terminate a contract.

Senator KING. I understand that. I am asking you a pretty straightforward question. Did you have anything to do whatsoever with the review of the contract of your former employer? That is a pretty straightforward yes-or-no question. I did or I did not.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I have not reviewed the contracts of my former employer.

Senator KING. That is not what I asked. I asked did you have anything to do whatsoever with that review.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I have not reviewed any contracts of my former employer.

Senator KING. Okay, that is the third—

Ms. BRAZELL. Again, I am not a contracting authority.

Senator KING [continuing]. The third time you have given me that answer, and for the third time I am going to say that is not what I am asking. I am asking were you involved in any way whatsoever with the review of the contract of your former employer?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, I have answered that. I am not a contracting official or contracting authority. I have not reviewed the contracts of my former employer.

Senator KING. By failure to answer that question you just lost my vote on this nomination.

In your opening statement you used the term “risks” three or four times, or five times, with regard to people under your supervision. I do not want the people under your supervision that are making decisions about benefits for veterans taking risks. What in the world did you mean by taking risks?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, when you employ new technology, and I think you know that from your time at L.L. Bean, per our discussion when I visited you, there are opportunities for folks when we—you have got to learn your mistakes. You have got to fail fast. You do that in a test environment, understanding the constraints of the technology and how it is going to interface with the legacy systems when you go to a live environment. So test it in a production environment, fail fast, learn faster.

Senator KING. I just do not like the idea of a test environment and risks being taken with people’s lives and disability compensation. If you are talking about working a model, that is one thing. But if you are talking about real people and real decisions, the idea of risks and experimenting is not acceptable.

What role did you have in the whole contract cancellation process?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, I recommended a structure for proper review, by career senior leaders, who independently evaluated contracts to decide which ones to terminate, descope, or not renew.

Senator KING. I thought the bulk of that process was done by a fellow at DOGE. Were you in charge of that? Did you bring him in? Did you consult with Mr.—I cannot remember his name—Levine, or something along those lines?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, we have no DOGE employees. They are VA employees.

Senator KING. I know. But the people who did the initial review of the contracts were DOGE. Is that not correct?

Ms. BRAZELL. They were VA employees, Senator.

Senator KING. They were VA employees. Are you familiar with Sahil Lavingia, a programmer enlisted by DOGE, which was then run by Elon Musk, who worked at the VA and developed the software that evaluated the contracts? You are denying that he ever was involved in this process?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I did not say I was denied—he was not involved in the process, nor did I deny I know him. But what I am clarifying for the record, there were VA employees—

Senator KING. He was a VA employee when—

Ms. BRAZELL. He was a VA employee. He was a VA employee.

Senator KING. Do you feel that the contract review process was successful and effective?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, the contract review process has never been done before, but it did allow a lot of the senior leaders responsible, the career leaders responsible for their programs, to be made aware of a lot of—several of the duplicate contracts that they had under their oversight.

Senator KING. Several thousands were canceled. Wasn't it 16,000? There has been some dispute. The Ranking Member said 30-something. The number I have been using is 16,000. Isn't that the correct number, canceled?

Ms. BRAZELL. No, Senator. The correct number as of today is about 2,500, out of about 76,000.

Senator KING. Well, that's certainly a number we can check. And in your answer to the questions of the Committee you said, "The FY '26 budget"—this is a direct quote—"reflects no reduction-in-force." And yet I have the budget filing that says disability compensation minus 862 people. What am I missing? That sounds like a reduction-in-force to me. The budget of the administration for 2026 is 862 fewer people than were there the year before. Isn't that a reduction-in-force?

Ms. BRAZELL. No, Senator, and I am not sure of the document that you are referencing. But—

Senator KING. It is a VA document. It's General Operating Expenses FTE by Business Line and Management Direction and Support. Subtotal, disability compensation, minus 862 people.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator King, I was not involved in any of the budget development, and I have not been involved in any of the VBA operations.

Senator KING. Then, why did you say the FY '26 reflects no reduction-in-force?

Ms. BRAZELL. Because we have not had a reduction-in-force, Senator. We had voluntary separations through VERA, VSIP, and DRP.

Senator KING. If somebody leaves, isn't that a reduction-in-force?

Ms. BRAZELL. Not in—

Senator KING. You have fewer people to process claims, right? 862 fewer, according to the budget submitted by the administration.

Ms. BRAZELL. And those are voluntary separations.

Senator KING. I understand that. But that is still 862 fewer people there to process claims.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I cannot say if 862 people is going to impact the claims processing, and if confirmed, I will do a full workforce assessment.

Senator KING. Well, thank you. I have to say that the contract cancellation process is one of the most disastrous I have ever seen in 25 years in this business, and to say that a person who was engaged in that will then become in charge of the veterans' benefit program, that is a lift for me. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Sullivan.

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

Senator SULLIVAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Ms. Brazell, I want to thank you and your family for wanting to serve. By the way, I want you to maybe talk a little bit about your family and service. Your dad was a Vietnam vet. Your husband served 40 years, I think—no, husband of 40 years. Sorry.

Ms. BRAZELL. Yes.

Senator SULLIVAN. You served in the military. Can you give me a little sense of your military service and your family's military service, and why you want this position?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator Sullivan, first I want to thank you for your leadership on Camp Lejeune.

Senator SULLIVAN. Oh, I am going to get to that. Trust me. All my colleagues are leaving, too, because I want them to hear it.

Ms. BRAZELL. I think—

Senator SULLIVAN. Your service and your family's. I think it is a big part of wanting to go join the VA.

Ms. BRAZELL. It is. Again, service is in my heart. It is in my—I do not want to say DNA, but, you know, I grew up as an Air Force family member. We have been stationed everywhere. I was born abroad. And one thing that I remember about my dad is he was enlisted, and he took his GI Bill and went back and got his degree, when he was in his 40s. And I remember when he walked across that stage with his bachelor's degree, me, personally, I said, it does not matter what your age is. Education is a continuous journey.

It is just like me. I just finished my doctorate. All four of my degrees I have earned at night school while working full-time.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good. And didn't you use the GI Bill for some of your—

Ms. BRAZELL. I did. I did for my first two degrees, my associate's and my bachelor's.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good. Well, thank you for your service and your family's service. It is not always easy. And when I say it is a family matter when you are serving your country, either in uniform or in an important position like this. So thank you.

So let's turn to the Camp Lejeune bill. This is, you know, a real outrage from my perspective. I voted to provide the long-awaited relief for veterans and families who were affected by the water contamination at Camp Lejeune. And yet, the Biden administration

Department of Justice, now the Trump administration Department of Justice, all predicted if you do not put attorneys' fees, caps on the awards, that the trial lawyers would get all the money, and the sick Marines and their families would not get anything.

And I know we have some VFW and American Legion post members here, but this is an issue I have been fighting for, because my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, to be honest, were more interested in giving their allies at law firms money, not sick Marines and their families. And I have been sick about it. It is the biggest issue, the biggest injustice I have seen in my 10 years in the Senate. Everybody knows about it. Everybody kind of looks the other way. I was not looking the other way.

The Attorney General of the Biden administration agreed with me, saying this is an outrage. You cannot have law firms—and you see them advertising all over the place—70 percent contingency fees, 65 percent contingency fees. Stealing the money from sick Marines and their families. It is disgusting.

So can you give me your commitment to work with the Secretary, who is very committed to this, and the Attorney General—and I have had a lot of discussions with her—on at least where we are on the current contingency fees. Anything above that would be against the law. Anything above 25 percent. I am still trying to pass my bill to make those not so high. These are not trials. These are kind of, you know, already determined administrative procedures that, under the law, are very simple. I do not even think a lot of Marines and their families need attorneys. They can work through the Department of the Navy and you guys.

But can you give me your sense on that? It is an issue I care deeply about, and I have just been so disappointed how the other side of the aisle has thrown the Marines under the bus, to help law firms. It is really disgusting.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, no veteran should have to pay a third party to receive the benefits they have earned.

Senator SULLIVAN. Especially if that third party is charging them 70 percent contingency fees. Correct? Seventy percent of the money goes to these law firms.

Ms. BRAZELL. Agreed. And Senator, Camp Lejeune is very personal to me. My oldest brother was a Marine—I should say former Marine—and he was medically discharged because of his toxic exposure to the water from his independent trucking job, about a decade ago. So it is near and dear to my heart, as well as all the other Marines, family members that served or lived on Camp Lejeune.

Senator SULLIVAN. Is he still alive, your brother?

Ms. BRAZELL. Yes, Senator, he is.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good. Well, I hope—

Ms. BRAZELL. And he is watching today.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good. Well, tell him *semper fi*. Tell him I have his back. Tell him not to sign up for any of these darn, you know, law firms that are advertising. By the way, billions of dollars. Do you think they are advertising billions of dollars because they want to help guys like your brother? No. They are doing it because they want to line their own pockets.

So can I get your commitment to work with me, at least the present way in which to make sure? The Attorney General of the

United States, under President Biden, said that if you are a law firm and you are charging more than 25 percent, they will go after you, civil and criminal liabilities. We should be doing that.

Can I get your commitment, Ms. Brazell, on that issue, to work with me, work with this Committee, and work with the Department of Justice to make sure that injustice does not happen in the Marines? They have already suffered through the contaminated water, and we want guys like your brother to be whole. Can I get your commitment to work with me on that?

Ms. BRAZELL. Yes.

Senator SULLIVAN. Good. And we will work with you, and make sure people like your brother who served in the Marine Corps honorably—by the way, there are no former Marines; there are just Marines—that we will work with you together on that. But I appreciate your commitment to that cause, and I appreciate you and your family's service.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Sullivan. Senator Tillis.

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

Senator TILLIS. Welcome, Dr. Brazell, and I would like to associate myself with everything my friend from Alaska had to say about, I think, some of the abuses. It is even worse than that. I tried to get something done in H.R. 1, to go after third-party litigation. So it is even worse.

Now you have private equity. You have sovereign wealth funds from foreign nations investing in litigation. They get some of the wins. And it is absurd. So we really do need a whole-of-the-administration approach to getting people to recognize. When our office worked on the Camp Lejeune Toxics Act, it was to do right by the families who had suffered. And now you have got a bunch of slimy lawyers taking advantage and making more money than the people who were absolutely harmed. We need to go after every one of them.

And actually, in that same bill was the PACT Act, that I want to get to you a little bit later on, about some of the headwinds that it has created. Because, quite honestly, with all due respect to my colleagues here, I voted against the bill because it was not ready for prime time, and you are going to be a part of what is going to be needed to fix it.

Let me poison the well here and tell you, I am going to support your confirmation.

I am going to get back to a few questions in the time remaining, but I know the hour is late. But Mr. Chair, I want to read, Sarah Verardo, I think that you have met Ms. Verardo, from The Independence Fund. Her husband, Mike Verardo, died. I have got this statement I want to read to you, because I think it is appropriate. I spoke at his eulogy.

“When my husband Michael died on August the 26th, his VA pay and his Army retirement pay were deposited into our account the very next day, August 27th. Without any notice to me, those payments were then reversed on 9 September, overdrafting my account and triggering fees. I had the means to cover it, but many sur-

viving families do not. The lack of communication and that window between a veteran's death and the start of survivor benefits is unacceptable. Families need clear notice and a process that does not leave them financially blindsided in the midst of all that grief."

I would like unanimous consent also to have her statement in the record.

Chairman MORAN. Without objection.

[The statement referred to appears on page 73 of the Appendix.]

Senator TILLIS. We have got to fix this. You know, I was there. I spent a lot of time at the Verardo home the night he died. This is the last thing she should have had to experience. And she has the means to get through it. A lot of people do not.

So now let me get mad so I won't cry. I am hopeful that somebody with your background in information technology and supply chain, and presumably large-scale implementations, that we can finally get a scheduling system that works, after billions of dollars that have been spent, that we can finally get wait times down to a level that are acceptable, because they have grown. In spite of all the efforts on a bipartisan basis, over several administrations to fix it. How do we go about fixing that? Or how do you propose to come in—you have got to know the situation. Tell me your method for actually going after this and giving me some hope that in my remaining time in the U.S. Senate I may be able to see some progress.

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, you raise a good point. Let's address first the overpayment. That is unacceptable that we would do that to a veteran or a veteran's family. We have to address that. We have to ensure that we have the processes and procedures in place to actually have those capabilities of ensuring that we are not putting any veteran in financial burden.

With respect to your question about scheduling, that is for the health care side. But I commit to you that I will—

Senator TILLIS. But it is a broader problem. It is the reason I am bringing it up. You are going to be head of the VBA, and there is going to be a lot of transformation opportunities here. I think that we are throwing money down a money pit, and it is not about the money. It is about the lack of service that we are giving veterans by throwing that money down the money pit. This is a \$10 billion scheduling system.

So my point is, in the VBA, and where you need people, process, technology changes, can you assure me that you will do right by the veterans and right by Congress to spend this money effectively, getting the lead on target, and succeed?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, it will require the internal stakeholder engagement, but I commit that we will ensure that the right stakeholders at the table at the very beginning, to ensure that we deliver to our veterans.

Senator TILLIS. Well, I think we need to step back, and I think we ought to have a discussion about the extent to which Benefits Administration has been affected by any of the decisions of Congress.

Here is what I will leave you with, and I hope that you will commit to me that you will come back here. Oftentimes the problems

we see in various agencies are a result of bad decisions made by us—well intended but not very well thought out in terms of how to implement them. And then we bring you back here and flog you for not being able to implement something that we are responsible for not having thought through the implementation.

So I would really appreciate if you could come back to us, not necessarily in an open hearing, but give us a stop-start-continue on the kinds of things that we are doing that are working and the things that we should stop doing, because it puts you further away from the very things we are asking you to accomplish. That would be very helpful if we could get some report back, specifically within the VBA, within 90 or 120 days of you getting over into the job. And I would appreciate that feedback. Can I get that commitment from you?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, you have my commitment.

Senator TILLIS. Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman MORAN. Senator Blumenthal.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just want to be clear about some of your responses to Senator King and Senator Hirono. Is it your testimony that nobody has been discharged or fired?

Ms. BRAZELL. Outside—it is my testimony that nobody has been—nobody has been RIF'ed. Nobody has been RIF'ed.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Nobody has been discharged or fired. Is that your testimony?

Ms. BRAZELL. Nobody—

Senator BLUMENTHAL. In other words, involuntarily separated, whatever you want to call it. But RIF'ed, I do not know what RIF'ed means. Tell me in the language that veterans can understand. Has anybody been fired?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator Blumenthal, not to my understanding.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Not to your knowledge? What about the thousands of probationary employees who have been discharged? They have been told they do not have a job anymore.

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member Blumenthal, I believe that is under litigation, so I cannot comment on that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You cannot comment on it, but how you can you say that no one has been fired, when in fact, thousands of probationary employees have been told, "You're discharged." And, by the way, thousands have been hired back, because lo and behold, the VA discovered it needed them. Are you aware of that fact?

Ms. BRAZELL. Senator, I mean Ranking Member Blumenthal, I am not aware of that.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You are not aware of it. But your testimony to us is no one has been fired. I cannot believe that testimony. Have you spoken to anyone at your former employer since your beginning work at the VA, anyone at Science Application International Corporation?

Ms. BRAZELL. The only individuals I spoke with was one to actually get some information from my financial disclosure. That was it.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. So you have not talked to anyone other than the person who was in charge of your financial disclosures facts.

Ms. BRAZELL. That is correct.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Are you aware that, of the people who have been separated from the VA—and it is in the thousands, is it not?

Ms. BRAZELL. I am not sure what you are asking me, Ranking Member.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. One third of them have been veterans. Correct?

Ms. BRAZELL. I can't confirm.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. What proportion have been veterans?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, I do not have that number. I will be happy to provide that to you following this hearing.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. In the VA workforce, isn't it a fact that 25 to 33 percent are veterans?

Ms. BRAZELL. Ranking Member, I do not have those statistics, and I would have to get back with you following this hearing.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You have worked at the VA, under the Trump administration, you have worked now for 7 months, and you do not know what proportion of the VA workforce are veterans?

Ms. BRAZELL. Not at the top of my head, what I can recall.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Did you ever care to find out?

Ms. BRAZELL. Absolutely. I am a veteran myself. But those have not been statistics that I have asked.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. You did care to find out, but you do not remember?

Ms. BRAZELL. That is not what I said, Senator.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. I am sorry. I—

Ms. BRAZELL. I do care. I do care, as a veteran. I think it is important that we look to always hire our veterans first. But I do not have those metrics for you at this hearing. I will be happy to provide those following this hearing.

Senator BLUMENTHAL. Mr. Chairman, I hope that this witness, perhaps in written responses after this hearing, will provide some answers to us. I think you can tell from our side that we are frustrated, because these are answers that I think veterans deserve. You know, veterans agree or disagree, but they really do not have a lot of tolerance for people who just will not answer. So thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you, Senator Blumenthal. I think this hearing is about to conclude. Let me make sure that we have nothing to add. And I want to give you, Doctor, the chance to say anything you would like to say, that maybe you want to clarify or something you wish you would have been asked, anything that you would like to add to the record before I close it for today.

Ms. BRAZELL. Thank you, Chairman Moran. I just want to thank the Committee for their time and for their consideration for my nomination, and if confirmed, I will ensure that all veterans are delivered timely and accurate benefits.

Chairman MORAN. Thank you. There are no further questions, and I thank the Committee members and certainly our witness and our audience for being here today.

Any Member, and this is what Senator Blumenthal was talking about what you were agreeing to do, Dr. Brazell, any Member who would like to send a question for the record to this nominee should do so as soon as possible, but no later than the close of business tomorrow. I did not say that quite correctly, but should do so as soon as possible, and then we need your response shortly thereafter. And this is your testimony today but your response to those questions are just like they are on the record, and will be considered by the Committee in your nomination process.

And with that the Committee is adjourned.

[Whereupon, at 5:08 p.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

Opening Statement

**Ranking Member Blumenthal
Opening Statement
Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
Pending Nomination Hearing
September 10, 2025**

- Dr. Brazell, thank you for your service to our nation — in uniform and as a military spouse — and for your willingness to continue to serve.
- Today, we will discuss your qualifications and vision if confirmed as VA's Under Secretary for Benefits.
- I'd like to know how you will protect VBA's core mission to provide world-class service and benefits to our nation's veterans — something that cannot be accomplished without sufficient resources and a workforce that is supported and empowered.
- The Trump Administration inherited a VBA that was providing more benefits to more veterans than ever before.
- The Biden Administration used authorities from the PACT Act to process more than 6.1 million VA disability compensation claims — a historic increase in the volume of claims submitted — and was on track to reduce the backlog to under 100,000 claims by this summer.
- For the past eight months, we've seen the Trump Administration prioritize its political agenda over the best interests of veterans and the dedicated public servants who work at VA — destroying VBA's workforce through hiring freezes and demoralizing initiatives like forced overtime.
- As a result, the quality of claims decisions has suffered — the number of higher-level reviews has increased by 21 percent.
- Higher level reviews are veterans asking VA to take a second look at their claim because the claims processor missed something or made an incorrect decision.
- And the average amount of days it takes VA to act on legacy appeals has increased by 44 percent — these are appeals from veterans who have waited years for a decision, and now must wait even longer.
- In addition to driving away tens of thousands of VA workers, President Trump and Secretary Collins recently decimated collective bargaining rights for 395,000 VA workers.
- That's 82% of the VA workforce losing their right to negotiate things like parental leave, disciplinary procedures, overtime and much more — a legal right afforded to nearly all other American workers.

- In fact, VA employees — many of whom are veterans themselves — have already lost a month of parental leave formerly guaranteed by their union agreement, and that's just the beginning.
- Collective bargaining also allowed employees to ensure VA health care was appropriately staffed, to ensure quality when evaluating benefits claims, and to implement consistent, fair training standards to ensure every veteran is receiving the highest quality care and benefits.
- Now, VA has lost those checks and balances *and* severely eroded employees' protections for blowing the whistle on waste, fraud, or abuse.
- This has led to a mass exodus at VBA — about 50 percent of VA's Regional Office Directors have opted to leave federal service rather than implement this Administration's union busting policies.
- More than 1,000 claims processors have opted to leave instead of dealing with unreasonable commutes to unsuitable workstations and forced overtime.
- This means fewer staff processing compensation and pension claims, survivor benefits claims, and GI Bill claims.
- Dr. Brazzell, you have been a Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins since day one and deeply involved in many of the decisions that have been made at VA.
- During our meeting, we discussed your involvement with Secretary Collins and DOGE's chaotic and callous cancellation of thousands of VA contracts.
- Secretary Collins has claimed these contracts were wasteful and for "PowerPoint presentations and meeting minutes."
- However, we know many of the cancelled contracts were for critical services – to help VA recruit and retain doctors, to maintain cancer registries, to support suicide prevention efforts, and to perform safety inspections at VA medical facilities.
- In fact, VA reinstated many of them after we highlighted how their cancellation would negatively impact the delivery of health care and benefits to veterans.
- Today, I would like to hear more from you about your involvement in developing the framework and process VA used to cancel these vital contracts.
- For any of us to make informed and responsible decisions regarding your nomination, we will need the full picture of your participation in these decisions, as well as your other ideas and plans for VBA.
- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Nomination Material for
KAREN L. BRAZELL**

OPENING STATEMENT
Nomination Hearing of Karen L. Brazell to be
Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs

Chairman Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.

I am honored to be considered for the role of Under Secretary for Benefits at the Department of Veterans Affairs. I want to thank President Trump for this nomination and Secretary Collins for his faith and confidence in me to lead one of the most consequential missions within the Department. I am equally grateful to the Members of this Committee for your unwavering commitment to Veterans and for considering my nomination.

This would be my second tour of duty, both at VA and with President Trump's administration, and I do not take lightly what that means. Leadership requires sacrifice—it requires giving more than those you lead. In today's environment, volunteering for political service brings intense scrutiny, personal attacks, and disclosure of one's private matters. I have accepted those responsibilities because I believe there is no higher calling than serving our nation's Veterans.

My family's story makes this mission profoundly personal. I am a third-generation veteran. Both of my grandfathers served in wartime, one in World War I and the other in World War II. My father, a Vietnam Veteran, served a 12-month deployment, and my husband of 40 years, First Sergeant (Retired) Kent, served in Operation Enduring Freedom. I continued that legacy as an enlisted woman in the United States Army. I know the rigorous preparations for deployment—the readiness checks, the long hours, and the responsibility of ensuring that you and your fellow soldiers are ready for whatever lies ahead.

Later, as a military spouse, I experienced deployment preparation from the other side—holding together a household, steadying children, and standing watch over the family so that Kent could focus on his mission abroad. Those dual perspectives, both in uniform and as a spouse, provided me with a profound understanding of servant leadership.

OPENING STATEMENT
Nomination Hearing of Karen L. Brazell to be
Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs

Kent is here with me today, along with our two daughters, Jamie and Jacquelin. My 88-year-old mother, a proud U.S. Air Force veteran, and my father-in-law, an almost 89-year-old retired U.S. Air Force veteran, are watching this hearing, along with other family members and friends. Their presence reminds me that military service is not just my story—it is our family’s story, a legacy of service and sacrifice across generations. I used my VA education benefits to advance my career, gaining firsthand insight into how these programs empower Veterans to transition successfully—a lived experience that will always guide my leadership.

Over my 40-year career in the military, government, and industry, I have worked to enhance Veterans' access to the benefits they earned. I proudly served four years on active duty, then spent the next 16 years supporting Kent’s Army career as a military spouse—experiencing the sacrifice, resilience, and strength required not only by those who serve, but also of their families. That perspective gives me a unique understanding of the human impact behind every VA policy.

In government, I have led at the intersection of policy, technology, and Veteran advocacy. As VA’s Chief Acquisition Officer and Acting Assistant Secretary for Enterprise Integration, I managed a \$30 billion portfolio and a workforce of over 12,000 professionals. I expedited the Community Care Network contracts to expand private-sector care and modernized benefits systems to streamline intake, scheduling, and monitoring—always with accountability, transparency, and trusted outcomes for veterans.

In the industry, I built on that experience by modernizing health IT and benefits delivery with technology companies. I deployed automation to accelerate claims intake, implemented real-time dashboards for oversight, and reduced backlogs that had kept Veterans waiting too long for decisions. These innovations minimized errors and delivered more reliable outcomes for Veterans and their families.

In every role, my focus has been to deliver results by listening to Veterans, elevating underserved voices, and empowered teams that never lost sight of the mission: *to put Veterans at the center of every decision, fighting for their access to*

OPENING STATEMENT
Nomination Hearing of Karen L. Brazell to be
Under Secretary for Benefits of the Department of Veterans Affairs

earned benefits, and ensure those benefits are delivered with dignity, efficiency, and urgency.

If confirmed, I will lead with three guiding principles: ***I will follow the law. I will put Veterans first. And I will ensure accountability and fiscal stewardship of taxpayer dollars.***

Thank you again to President Trump and Secretary Collins for entrusting me with this responsibility, and to the Members of this Committee for your trust and consideration. I look forward to your questions.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for Karen Brazell
Nominee for Under Secretary for Benefits
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
From Senator Jerry Moran
Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

August 14, 2025

1. Please detail the professional and personal experiences you believe prepare you to lead the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) as the Under Secretary for Benefits (USB).

My professional career spans over two decades in federal government and four years of executive leadership in industry, focusing on acquisition, digital transformation, and strategic leadership at the VA. I have led initiatives to modernize claims processing, integrate emerging technologies, and implement performance-based accountability, addressing key inefficiencies. My personal commitment to veteran service reinforces my dedication to ethical, veteran-centric leadership. I can navigate complex regulatory environments while driving cultural and operational change. These experiences prepare me to lead VBA in delivering timely and efficient benefits to veterans.

2. Please describe why you want to serve as Under Secretary for Benefits at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

I want to serve as the Under Secretary for Benefits (USB) to ensure every veteran receives the timely and accurate benefits they have earned. As a third-generation veteran with personal ties to military service, I bring a deep commitment to honoring the sacrifices of veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. My professional experience modernizing federal programs has shown me the importance of leading with accountability, innovation, and compassion to address system inefficiencies. By leveraging emergent technologies, strengthening the workforce, and fostering a service-oriented culture, I am dedicated to advancing VBA's mission with transparency and integrity. My goal is to lead the organization in a way that upholds trust, enhances benefit delivery, and places veterans at the center of every decision.

3. Please describe your understanding of VBA's mission. Do you anticipate making any changes to VBA's mission? If so, how and why? If not, why?

The mission of the VBA is critical, ensuring that veterans and their families receive the benefits and services they have earned in a timely, accurate, and compassionate manner. If confirmed, I do not anticipate changing VBA's mission; rather, I intend to strengthen it by ensuring benefits are delivered accurately, efficiently, and in a timely manner. My focus will be on modernizing processes, improving accountability, and reducing barriers so that VBA continues to meet the needs of those who have served our nation.

4. What do you believe are the most significant challenges facing VBA?

I believe it is the timely delivery of benefits to veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. For example, VBA continues to face a growing claims backlog driven by the expansion of benefits under the PACT ACT, which has increased both volume and complexity. In addition, modernization of legacy IT systems remains a challenge, as outdated technology slows claims processing and limits VBA's ability to deliver as efficiently as veterans deserve. Addressing these challenges will be essential to meet VBA's mission of providing timely, accurate, and accessible benefits.

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

If confirmed, I look forward to ensuring that every veteran receives timely and accurate access to the benefits they have earned through their service and prioritize reducing the claims backlog leveraging emergent technologies which align with the Secretary's priorities.

6. Please describe your understanding of VBA's current organizational structure. Do you anticipate making any structural changes? If so, how and why? If not, why?

If confirmed, I will review the current organizational structure to review for efficiencies but not until I have met with the leadership and employees in the field to understand how information is conveyed and garner their feedback.

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

I believe the VA should be a trusted partner in a veteran's life, ensuring they can access the care, benefits, and opportunities they have earned with dignity and ease. If confirmed, I will strengthen this trust by modernizing services, reducing barriers, and fostering a culture of advocacy for veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. My vision is a VA that delivers timely, seamless, and Veteran-centered outcomes across every point of contact.

8. Have you discussed with Secretary Collins what he expects you to prioritize if confirmed as Under Secretary for Benefits? If so, what are those priorities and how do you plan to address them?

Yes, Secretary Collins has been clear that his priorities are timely access to care, reducing benefits delivery backlog, eliminating inefficiencies, and modernizing outdated systems. He has emphasized that the VA must focus resources on frontline services that directly impact veterans, rather than sustaining unnecessary bureaucracy. If confirmed, I will advance these priorities by ensuring every veteran receives timely and accurate access to the benefits they have earned, while also driving modernization of benefits delivery through emergent technologies such as digital platforms, data analytics, and automation. We will no longer spend taxpayer funds on exhaustive studies that delay progress, but

instead apply agile methodologies comparable to our industry partners, delivering faster, data-driven, and veteran-centered outcomes.

If confirmed, I look forward to ensuring that every veteran receives timely and accurate access to the benefits they have earned through their service and prioritize reducing the claims backlog leveraging emergent technologies which align with the Secretary's priorities.

9. Describe why you think the Federal government should or should not provide benefits to certain veterans. What outcomes do you believe these benefits and services are attempting to effect, and do you believe those are the right outcomes to pursue? Why or why not?

Secretary Collins has made it clear that we support veterans receiving timely and accurate benefits they have earned. I believe this is essential for two reasons. First, these benefits are a solemn commitment that strengthens trust between the Nation and those who have served, ensuring veterans and their families know their sacrifices are honored. Second, providing effective support, whether through health care, education, or financial stability, helps veterans successfully transition to civilian life, reducing challenges such as unemployment, homelessness, and emotional resilience. The intended outcomes are stability, dignity, and opportunity for those who have served, and I firmly believe these are the right outcomes to pursue.

10. We often see issues at VBA related to information technology (IT). With your IT and contract background, how would you improve VBA's IT utilization— including as it relates to the disability claims backlog, Digital GI Bill, Medical Disability Exam Office, Acceptable Clinical Evidence exams, automation efforts, etc.

VBA's effectiveness in delivering timely and accurate benefits hinges on how well it leverages IT. With my IT and acquisition background, I would accelerate modernization using agile methodologies and emerging technologies to reduce delays and align with industry best practices.

First, robust automation can streamline claims processing and reduce backlogs by triaging claims, pre-populating forms, and quickly validating evidence, allowing staff to focus on complex cases.

Second, the Digital GI Bill platform shows that cloud-based solutions can replace outdated systems. By using agile development and continuous integration, VBA can deliver incremental improvements.

Third, in areas like the Medical Disability Examination Office and Acceptable Claims Evidence exams, technologies such as telehealth, natural language processing, and automated evidence review can reduce reliance on in-person exams and speed up decisions for veterans.

Finally, contract modernization is crucial. Rigid acquisition strategies hinder rapid technology adoption. My research focuses on modernizing federal acquisition practices, and I believe VBA can benefit from best-in-class contracting vehicles and performance-based incentives to onboard proven technologies faster.

If confirmed, I will push VBA toward a modern, agile, and veteran-centered IT posture using automation, cloud-based platforms, and smart contracting to deliver benefits more quickly and accurately.

11. Culture and accountability are critical for any large workforce.
- a. What does accountability mean to you and what experience do you have improving organizational culture?

Accountability to me means taking personal and organizational responsibility for results, decisions, and the ethical use of resources while fostering a culture where every team member understands their role in achieving mission outcomes. It is not just about oversight but about creating transparency, measurable outcomes, and a learning environment where mistakes become opportunities for improvement rather than sources of blame.

- b. If confirmed, how will you create a culture of accountability within VBA?

If confirmed, I would create a culture of accountability by clearly defining mission-aligned expectations, linking performance to outcomes, and empowering leaders at every level, to make responsible decisions. I would implement transparent metrics and reporting systems, showing staff how their work impacts veterans' benefits, while fostering a learning environment that rewards innovation and constructively addresses failures. My approach, informed by my research on federal acquisition reform and organizational culture, includes engaging teams in co-developing solutions, breaking down silos, and aligning incentives with measurable results. Finally, I would model accountability personally, make timely decisions, and consistently enforce standards, fostering a culture of responsibility and ethical stewardship alongside operational excellence.

- c. What level of accountability should veterans, Congress, and the public expect from the Under Secretary for Benefits when waste, fraud, abuse, or mismanagement occur within VBA?

Veterans, Congress, and the public should expect full transparency, decisive action, and unwavering responsibility from the USB when waste, fraud, abuse, or mismanagement occurs. If confirmed, I would ensure issues are promptly identified, thoroughly investigated, and corrected, while implementing systemic safeguards to prevent recurrence. By coordinating with oversight bodies and enforcing accountability at every level, I would maintain the trust of veterans and demonstrate that VBA resources are management ethically and efficiently.

12. It is critical that VBA employees who may identify an instance of fraud, waste, or abuse feel comfortable speaking up without fear of retribution.
- a. What role should the Under Secretary for Benefits play in ensuring VBA employees can safely disclose waste, fraud, abuse, and mismanagement and that such issues will be handled with appropriate sensitivity, confidentiality, and timeliness?

The USB must actively and visibly foster a culture where employees feel safe to report fraud, waste, abuse, or mismanagement without fear of retaliation. This involves setting clear zero-tolerance policies for reprisal, providing multiple confidential channels for disclosure, and acting swiftly and transparently on reports. The USB should ensure timely and sensitive investigations, communicate outcomes and corrective actions to promote accountability, and model ethical leadership. By holding senior leaders and managers to the highest standards, the USB can ensure that employees' concerns are taken seriously and addressed with integrity.

- b. If confirmed, what will you do to make certain that whistleblowers are encouraged to come forward and that they are protected from retaliation?

If confirmed, I will ensure whistleblowers are encouraged to come forward and protected from retaliation by taking five key actions. First, I will establish a zero-tolerance policy for reprisals, making it clear that protecting whistleblowers is a leadership priority. Second, I will enhance and publicize confidential reporting channels so employees know where and how to report concerns. Third, I will ensure timely and impartial investigations to reinforce accountability. Fourth, I will hold leaders and supervisors directly responsible for upholding whistleblower protections. Finally, I will foster a culture of trust, transparency, and respect, emphasizing that raising concerns is an act of service to veterans, the public, and the institution.

13. VA has improved disability claim processing timeliness by incorporating automation.
- a. How would you utilize your experience to adopt technology or programs that could improve performance across VBA?

With over two decades in federal service and recent experience in technology-driven companies modernizing VA systems, I would leverage proven practices in automation and process reengineering to improve performance across VBA. If confirmed, I would align technology adoption with mission outcomes—reducing claim processing times, enhancing accuracy, and improving the veteran experience—while ensuring scalability and sustainability. Building on successful models like automation in disability claims, I would expand modernization efforts across compensation, pension, education, and appeals.

- b. How would you navigate product development or selection?

In my experience, effective product selection requires inclusive governance and stakeholder engagement to ensure the federal procurement process is fair,

transparent, and competitive without undue influence. Internally, I would ensure claims processors, IT staff, General Counsel, and leaders contribute to defining requirements and testing solutions. Externally, I would engage Congress, OIG, GAO, and industry partners to ensure transparency and accountability. My philosophy is to evaluate products not only on technical merit, usability, cost-effectiveness, and alignments with long-term strategic goals.

- c. What challenges have you faced in adopting and integrating new products into your organization?

In my experience, the greatest challenges are not technical but cultural—resistance to change, risk aversion, and siloed decision-making. Integration can be slowed by regulatory barriers, unclear governance, or duplication of efforts across business lines. I have addressed these challenges by fostering collaboration, using pilots to demonstrate value, and aligning performance plans to reward innovation and accountability.

- d. What is your view of VA's past practices when deciding between in-house system development or off-the-shelf commercial products?

Historically, VA has relied too heavily on custom in-house system development, resulting in long timelines, higher costs, and limited interoperability. Commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) solutions often offer faster deployment, better security, and continuous updates. However, COTS requires careful configuration to avoid vendor lock-in. VBA should adopt a balanced approach, leveraging commercial products for efficiency and value, while developing in-house solutions only when necessary to meet unique mission requirements. Success depends on empowered and accountable personnel, agile acquisition and governance processes, and modern, interoperable, and secure technology platforms.

14. VBA is responsible for delivering various types of benefits that impact a veteran's financial well-being, career opportunities, and successful transition from the military to civilian life.

- a. If confirmed, how would you improve the military to civilian transition and what information would you measure to determine whether VBA's programs are having the intended impact on veterans' lives?

If confirmed, I would work to improve the military-to-civilian transition by leveraging the May 2025 Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and Secretary of Defense. This includes strengthening early outreach, simplifying navigation across VBA programs, and measuring outcomes such as timely claims decisions, employment, and avoidance of unnecessary debt. My understanding of current challenges comes from recent GAO and OIG reports highlighting issues like backlogs, inaccurate decisions, and limited outcome tracking. I would use these findings to ensure VBA programs not only process benefits efficiently but also have a measurable, positive impact on veterans' long-term financial stability and career opportunities.

- b. Are there other unique impacts VBA has on veterans that we should be measuring or further investing in?

In addition to financial well-being, career opportunities, and transition support, VBA significantly impacts the overall quality of life and stability of Veterans and their families. The current reliance on lengthy, manual forms and complex instructions creates unnecessary barriers. To be truly veteran-centric, VBA must modernize these processes, reduce paperwork, simplify requirements, and adopt digital solutions to facilitate faster access to benefits.

Furthermore, VBA's role in family stability and intergenerational opportunity is critical. Programs like Dependence and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefits, and caregiver support help not only veterans but also their spouses and children. Tracking these outcomes can reveal the broader impacts of VBA programs.

If confirmed, I would prioritize new measures of veteran well-being, such as the correlation between timely benefits and reductions in homelessness, suicide, or unemployment rates. I would explore emergent technologies to help VBA proactively identify at-risk veterans and connect them to resources quickly. Collaborating with internal and external experts, I would investigate tools like predictive analytics, automation, and large language models to modernize claims processing and streamline evidence review. Additionally, I would strengthen collaboration across VA Health and DoD transition programs to ensure a seamless, holistic experience for Veterans and their families.

- c. VA works closely with the Departments of Defense, Labor, Education, and the Small Business Administration to support the successful transition of veterans from military to civilian life.
- i. If confirmed, what interagency relationships would you prioritize to better support veterans?

If confirmed, I would prioritize strengthening the interagency relationship with the DoD, Department of Labor (DoL), Department of Education (ED), and the Small Business Administration (SBA), as each is essential to VBA's mission of supporting seamless transition. DoD is critical for ensuring service members connect with benefits before separation, DoL for lining veterans to obtain sustainable employment, ED for maximizing GI Bill and credentialing opportunities, and SBA for advancing veteran entrepreneurship. While these partnerships are vital, I would also focus on improving coordination and data sharing across these agencies, so veterans experience a unified pathway rather than fragmented programs.

- ii. Which key functions of veteran support do you believe are best done by VA and which are best accomplished by, or in coordination with, other departments or agencies?

If confirmed, I would begin by closely reviewing which veteran support functions are most effective within VA and which are best achieved through interagency coordination. In principle, VA is best positioned to deliver core benefits such as disability compensation, pension, education, and loan guaranty, while other functions—employment services, credentialing, and entrepreneurship—are often most effective when carried out in coordination with the Departments of Labor, Education, and the Small Business Administration. Because I have not been directly involved in VBA operations, I would look into this matter thoroughly to ensure veterans receive seamless support through the right mix of VA-led and interagency effort.

- iii. If confirmed, how would you collaborate with state and local governments, as well as with non-government entities, to support veterans in achieving success after service?

If confirmed, I would strengthen collaboration with state and local governments and non-governmental partners to expand veterans' access to resources beyond federal programs. VA can provide the core benefits, but community organizations, state agencies, and nonprofits often deliver the local employment, housing, health, and education support that make those benefits truly effective. My focus would be on building stronger partnerships, improving information sharing, collaboration, advocacy, and reducing duplication so that veterans experience a seamless network of support.

15. VBA is tasked with deciding claims for disability benefits to compensate veterans for lost earnings due to service-connected injuries and illnesses. To support that work, VBA can set standards regarding the evidence used to adjudicate claims for these benefits. Given the known challenges with respect to adjudicating claims related to military toxic exposures, and the authorities provided in the PACT Act, what innovative approaches or significant changes to policy do you believe should be explored to improve the disability claims process from both veteran perspective and in terms of resource allocation and why?

If confirmed, I will look into this matter.

16. I hear frequently from veterans and survivors about the need to improve communication and understanding regarding claims that are designated as "ready for decision." If confirmed, how will you improve transparency to veterans, survivors, and other dependents and work with Veterans experience Office and Office of Field Operations on improving communication and outreach with respect to these claims?

If confirmed, I will look into this matter. Early outreach is incredibly important to what VBA does with internal and external partners to ensure positive veteran outcomes.

17. How would you respond if the Secretary, the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, or other official entities develop or issue guidance you believe is inconsistent with the law?

I do not believe that the Secretary, the White House, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Personnel Management, or any other official entities would develop or issue an illegal order.

18. What do you believe is the role of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, as well as Congress as a whole, as it relates to VA?

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and Congress more broadly, play a vital role in ensuring accountability, transparency, and stewardship at VA through their constitutional oversight responsibilities. While the Executive Branch is charged with administering benefits and services, Congress exercises its authority by authorizing programs, appropriated funds, and overseeing VA's performance to safeguard the interests of veterans and taxpayers. This relationship reflects the separation of powers—Congress provides oversight and policy direction, while VA executes programs within the laws established. If confirmed as USB, I view this partnership as essential to both accountability and continuous improvement in serving veterans.

19. If confirmed, will you commit to personally holding regular briefings, no less than monthly, with Committee staff to provide updates on your efforts and actions, as your predecessors have done?

If confirmed, I look forward to continued collaboration to ensure that every veteran receives timely and accurate benefits they have earned through their service.

20. If confirmed, would you commit to instructing VBA program offices to provide regular briefings, no less than quarterly and as requested in between, with Committee staff, as has been past precedent?

If confirmed, I look forward to continued collaboration and commitment to staff engagement.

21. Please describe your tenure as a Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins. What have your responsibilities and achievements been? How, if at all, have your role and responsibilities as Senior Advisor changed since being nominated for this position?

In my role as Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins, my primary responsibility was to serve as a conduit of information, collecting insights from the Office of Acquisition, Logistics (OALC), and Construction, the Office of Enterprise Integration (OEI), and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), then synthesizing and conveying this information directly to the Secretary and senior leadership. This role has enabled information decision-making by providing real-time operational insights and nuanced perspectives across the offices. Additionally, I coordinated cross-functional communication to align messaging and policy development.

22. Please detail your involvement as Senior Advisor with respect to VA's efforts in the Agency Reduction in Force and Reorganization Planning process, the ongoing hiring freeze for certain occupations, return to office directives, and the Deferred Resignation Program.

As Senior Advisor to the Secretary, I was not involved in the Agency Reduction in Force and Reorganization Planning process, (which did not occur), the hiring freeze for certain occupations, return to office directives, or the Deferred Resignation Program as these were Human Resources and Administration activities outside of my area of oversight.

I have no specific duties on these matters as part of my portfolio. I have had limited activity within my portfolio to concur with career staff for career specialties who are exempt from actions like the hiring freeze to ensure alignment to the Secretary's focus to not impact frontline benefit and health care delivery.

In my role as a Senior Advisor, I review and concur on similar matters to validate alignment to the Secretary's priorities to look at if the content appears to answer the question asked and similar matters. My role is limited to reviewing, providing suggestions, and concurring but not approving.

**Pre-Hearing Questions for the Record
Nomination Hearing of Karen Brazell to be
Under Secretary of Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs
From Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal**

September 9, 2025

1. Describe why you want to serve as Under Secretary for Benefits (USB) at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), your qualifications for this role, and the circumstances of how you came to be considered for nomination to this position.

I want to serve as the Under Secretary for Benefits (USB) to ensure every veteran receives the timely and accurate benefits they have earned. As a third-generation veteran with personal ties to military service, I bring a deep commitment to honoring the sacrifices of veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors. My professional experience modernizing federal programs has shown me the importance of leading with accountability, innovation, and compassion to address system inefficiencies. By leveraging emergent technologies, strengthening the workforce, and fostering a service-oriented culture, I am dedicated to advancing VBA's mission with transparency and integrity. My goal is to lead the organization in a way that upholds trust, enhances benefit delivery, and places veterans at the center of every decision.

2. Describe any specific roles, responsibilities and goals of the USB position you have discussed with Secretary Collins and your understanding of those roles.

Secretary Collins has been clear that his priorities are timely access to care, reducing benefits delivery backlog, eliminating inefficiencies, and modernizing outdated systems. He has emphasized that the VA must focus resources on frontline services that directly impact veterans, rather than sustaining unnecessary bureaucracy. If confirmed, I will advance these priorities by ensuring every veteran receives timely and accurate access to the benefits they have earned, while also driving modernization of benefits delivery through emergent technologies such as digital platforms, data analytics, and automation. We will no longer spend taxpayer funds on exhaustive studies that delay progress, but instead apply agile methodologies comparable to our industry partners, delivering faster, data-driven, and veteran-centered outcomes. If confirmed, I look forward to ensuring that every veteran receives timely and accurate access to the benefits they have earned through their service and prioritize reducing the claims backlog leveraging emergent technologies which align with the Secretary's priorities.

3. What is your vision for the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) over the next several years? In your response, please speak to the role of the VBA workforce, the potential of automation and emerging technologies, and any policy or process reforms you believe are necessary to improve the delivery of benefits to veterans.

My vision for VBA is to strengthen the Claims, Benefits, and Appeals workforce by equipping them with the tools, training, and leadership support necessary to deliver timely, accurate, and compassionate service to veterans and their families. By leveraging emerging technologies such as advanced analytics and digital platforms, VBA can modernize processes, reduce backlogs, and improve decision quality. I believe policy and process reforms must focus on simplifying regulations, aligning incentives with performance, and integrating enterprise-wide innovation practices to ensure greater flexibility, and accountability. Together, these efforts will foster a modern, veteran-centered benefits system that honors service with efficiency, transparency, and trust.

4. If confirmed, what will be your top priorities as USB and what will be your biggest challenges?

If confirmed as USB, my top priorities will be to modernize the VBA claims and appeals processes, strengthen the workforce, and ensure a more veteran-centered experience through digital transformation and policy reforms. I will emphasize the integration of emerging technologies to reduce backlogs, improve transparency, and increase accountability while maintaining strong fiscal stewardship. The greatest challenges will be overcoming entrenched cultural resistance, addressing legacy system limitations, and balancing the urgent need for efficiency with statutory oversight and requirements that safeguard public trust. Through principled leadership and collaboration, I will work to align resources, policy, and technology to deliver timely benefits to all veterans.

5. How will your role as Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins inform your approach to leading VBA?

My role as Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins gave me direct insight into the Department's priorities, interagency dynamics, and the cultural challenges that influence delivery of benefits by putting the Veteran-First and decrease the backlog. This experience strengthened my ability to connect strategic vision with operational execution, ensuring that modernization efforts remain veteran-centered and accountable. It will guide my leadership of VBA by fostering collaboration, aligning reforms with enterprise strategy, and driving sustainable change.

6. Since joining VA as a Senior Advisor in January 2025, you have held several different policy portfolios. Please list each office or Administration or policy area where you have served as the designated Senior Advisor and the time periods where you were assigned that portfolio. For each portfolio, office or Administration you were assigned to, please indicate the top three initiatives you worked on during your period as Senior Advisor for that area of responsibility.

In my role as Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins, my primary responsibility was to serve as a conduit of information, collecting insights from the Office of Acquisition, Logistics (OALC), and Construction, the Office of Enterprise Integration (OEI), and the Office of Information and Technology (OIT), then synthesizing and conveying this information directly to the Secretary and senior leadership.

- OALC: January 2025 to mid-June 2025. My top three priorities included: supporting the Executive Orders and assessment of governance and fiscal stewardship of taxpayer dollars.
- OEI: January 2025 to present. My top three priorities included assessment of: enterprise governance, development of the strategic plan, and Enterprise Program Management and Requirements policy.
- OIT: April 2025 to present. My top three priorities include assessment of: modernization of systems and infrastructure; data and emergent technology integration; and governance, accountability, and workforce alignment.
- Board of Veterans Appeals: August 2025 to present. My primary priority is assessment of inventory and reduction.

7. There is concern among veterans and VBA employees that loyalty to political figures is undermining confidence in VA leadership. How will you reassure veterans and employees that your service will be independent, principled, and nonpartisan?

If confirmed, I will instill confidence in VA leadership by emphasizing my role is to uphold the law, advance the Department's mission, and serve veterans above all else. I will demonstrate this by respecting career professionals' expertise and fostering transparent decision-making,

8. As Senior Advisor, how have you been involved in developing the Fiscal Year 2026 budget request for VA? Do you know why VBA's budget request was not published along with the rest of VA's budget request?

As a Senior Advisor, I did not participate directly in the development of the FY26 budget request, particularly for VBA. My role has been to stay informed through briefings with senior career leaders in the areas where I hold responsibility, to understand their priorities for VA leadership to ensure alignment with broader VA strategy.

9. As Senior Advisor, have you been involved in the contract cancellation process at VA since January 2025, and are you aware of any effects these cancellations have had on VBA?

As Senior Advisor, I have not been directly involved in the VA's contract cancellation process since January 20, 2025, as my role has been to assess information and advise VA leadership. My role has been to monitor at a strategic level, to assess continuity of mission support implemented through the authority of warranted contract officials.

10. Given your experience at VA, what is your relationship with the Veteran Service Organization (VSO) community, and what is your plan to ensure VBA maintains effective relationships with VSOs?

I have not had direct engagement with the national Veteran Service Organizations, though I have had minimal interaction with some state-based groups. If confirmed, my intent is to respect the critical role VSOs play and to ensure VBA fosters a collaborative, transparent partnership with the VSO community in order to be serve veterans.

11. Congress has expressed concerns that DOGE staff or other individuals may use their access to VA IT systems to collect veterans' data, for use in or by unauthorized government initiatives or private sector businesses.

- a. If confirmed, will you work to secure all the data under the control of VBA, consistent with VA policy and procedures, and the federal government's cyber and legal protections and only allow sharing of the data when such sharing is authorized by law or regulation?

If confirmed, I will ensure that all data under VBA's control is managed in strict accordance with VA polices, federal cybersecurity, standards, and legal protections.

- b. Will you follow the Federal Information Security Modernization Act, the Privacy Act, the E-Government Act of 2002, and other cyber and national security laws?

Yes.

12. Stakeholders have raised concerns that VBA IT systems are outdated and insufficient to handle increasing workloads. If confirmed, how will you ensure VA prioritizes the modernization of VBA IT systems, using resources in the PACT Act and beyond, to make it easier for veterans to file claims and to help VBA employees process claims?

If confirmed, I will assess VBA's IT systems to ensure modernization is prioritized, including use of PACT Act resources and beyond, so that veterans can file claims more easily and employees can process them more efficiently. My focus will be on aligning the right people, processes, and technology to reduce burdens on both veterans and staff.

- a. Are there specific technology solutions you plan to adopt for VBA, if confirmed?

While I will not commit to specific solutions at this stage, automation and other digital tools have clear potential to improve accuracy and timeliness, and I will carefully evaluate their role in strengthening VBA's claims processing system.

- b. Should VA adopt end-to-end automation for processing disability benefits claims?

Automation should be carefully adopted where it improves accuracy and timeliness, but always with proper governance and oversight to ensure veterans' claims are decided individually.

13. VA is largely under a hiring freeze and prior to that instituted a zero-growth policy. How would you reconcile this with VA's ongoing record-breaking claims processing, which is largely due to staffing increases of the past several years?

It is important to recognize that the record-breaking claims processing is down 37% since January 20, 2025, we've seen is due to the Trump Administration and Secretary Collins' commitment to put Veterans First. If confirmed, I will assess and rebalance resources to ensure VBA can sustain timely and accurate claims processing. By strengthening workload management and advancing digital modernization, I will ensure VBA can maintain progress without overreliance on temporary staffing surges.

14. The FY2026 budget request plans for an 862 FTE reduction in the disability compensation workforce. Yet, it includes \$116.3 million to cover the cost of overtime. How does a reduction in the VBA workforce in favor of reinstating overtime impact claims processing and staff morale? What is your opinion on the long-term plan for mandatory overtime for claims processors?

The FY 2026 budget reflects no reduction in force; employees chose to separate through VERA or VSIP. If confirmed, I will assess the impact of these changes on claims processing, the need for continued overtime, and how best to rebalance workloads in a way that supports both timely delivery of benefits and the well-being of VBA staff. Long-term, mandatory overtime should not substitute for a sustainable staffing and workload management strategy.

15. I am concerned VBA is sacrificing quality for timeliness when processing claims. The committee has also heard from VA staff who report that quality review staff are unable to accomplish their primary mission of auditing the accuracy of claims decisions because they have been forced to adjudicate claims due to staffing shortages. What will you do to ensure VBA processes claims in an accurate and timely manner?

I was not involved in VBA's budget development. If confirmed, I will assess VBA's budget.

16. VA must retain the earliest possible effective date for claims filed, particularly for direct service-connection, before the passage of the PACT Act. What is VA doing to ensure claims are provided at the earliest possible effective date, rather than automatically overriding claims with new presumption rules and potentially eliminating years of back pay for veterans?

If confirmed, I will assess VA's actual claims outcomes to ensure the process is delivering fair, timely effective dates and that veterans do not lose years of backpay due to policy implementation.

17. The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit in *Taylor v. McDonough* concluded that veterans who participated in a secret Army program at the Edgewood Arsenal were deprived legal entitlement to VA disability benefits while they were under a required secrecy oath. The court ordered VA to make the

effective date of benefits for these veterans the date they were discharged from military service, not the date a claim was filed. I introduced the OATH Act to codify the Taylor decision. Can you commit to ensuring faithful and expedient implementation of the new effective date rules for veterans who were forced to sign secrecy oaths?

If confirmed, I will be happy to look into this case and consult with VA's General Counsel.

18. Supporting veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST) remains a critical priority for me. Multiple Office of Inspector General reports have shown VBA has wrongly denied veterans' disability claims for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder related to MST at unacceptably high rates. Though VA has made strides in this area, a recent VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) report indicated the MST Operations Center still faces workforce, process, and claims accuracy challenges. If confirmed, what steps would you take to address the OIG recommendations?

If confirmed, I will prioritize closing OIG's open recommendations on Military Sexual Trauma (MST) claims by strengthening MST Operations Center, improving training and oversight, and ensuring consistent use of non-DoD evidence and behavioral "markers" as allowed under law and OGC guidance. As someone who has personally experienced MST, though never formally reported, I am deeply committed to ensuring survivors are treated with dignity and compassion, and that they receive the benefits they have earned without re-traumatization.

19. I have championed the *Servicemembers and Veterans Empowerment and Support Act of 2025*, which would reduce the evidential standard for MST survivors who apply for VA disability benefits for a mental health condition related to their MST. Given the prevalence of unreported or underreported MST instances, do you agree that VA should consider non-Department of Defense evidence sources when reviewing all mental health claims related to MST, not limited to PTSD claims? Will you work with me to ensure MST survivors are not retraumatized or have their honor questions when they apply for the VA disability compensation benefits they deserve?

I share the commitment to ensuring that survivors of Military Sexual Trauma are treated with dignity and respect when they seek VA benefits. While I am not in a position to commit to specific legislative proposals at this time, if confirmed, I will carefully assess how SBV can ensure fair, compassionate, and lawful consideration of these claims. President Trump and Secretary Collins have made it clear that we will put veterans first, and I will carry out that principle in supporting survivors while faithfully executing the law.

20. During President Trump's first term, the Office of Management and Budget proposed to reduce disability compensation benefits for the most severely ill and injured veterans simply because they reached retirement age. What is your position on this issue?

I am not aware of the specific proposal you reference. What I do know is that President Trump and Secretary Collins have made it clear that we will put veterans first to ensure they have the benefits they have earned.

21. To achieve cost savings, VA and the Office of Management and Budget have been urged to consider reforms to the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD). If confirmed, what reforms to the VASRD would you propose or support? Do you support means-testing VA disability compensation benefits or limiting compensation to veterans rated 30 percent service-connected disabled or higher?

If confirmed, I would begin by assessing any proposed reforms to the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD) to ensure they are evidence-based, consistent with statute, and protect veterans' earned benefits. It would be premature for me to commit to specific reforms without this assessment.

22. VBA contractors now conduct nearly nine in ten medical disability examinations. There continue to be concerns about poor communication between veterans and contractors, and the quality and timeliness of contract exams. What will you do to improve oversight of the process to schedule these exams and their quality and thoroughness?

If confirmed, I will strengthen oversight of VBA contractors conducting medical disability examinations by improving communication with veterans, holding contractors accountable for quality and timeliness, and ensuring transparency in the scheduling process. In addition, if confirmed, I would look to leverage the second VA-DOD interagency Memorandum of Understanding signed May 2025, to explore shared resources and, where statutory authorities allow, conduct transition exams at VA facilities. This dual approach will help improve exam quality, reduce delays, and reinforce trust in the process.

23. Companies without VA accreditation have made millions of dollars assisting veterans in obtaining VA benefits. Some in Congress believe veterans should have the ability to pay for assistance when filing an initial benefits claim. Others believe these organizations are preying on veterans and must not be allowed to operate.

- a. What are your thoughts on for-profit benefits assistance?

Congress has the authority to determine whether, and under what conditions, for-profit companies may assist veterans in filing initial benefits claims. At the same time, it is incumbent upon VA to ensure that our claims filing process is transparent, accessible, and modernized so veterans do not believe they need to hire outside, for-profit assistance.

- b. What additional safeguards should VBA put into place to protect veterans?

If confirmed, I will work to strengthen VBA's processes and safeguards while supporting Congress in exploring appropriate caps or limits to protect veterans from predatory practices.

24. Women veterans are the fastest growing veteran demographic. Yet, many women veterans do not utilize VA benefits. All VBA Regional Offices have a Women Veteran Coordinator who is tasked with outreach to women veterans, but this role is in addition to the staff member's regular VBA duties.

- a. How do you plan to improve women veterans' awareness of the VA benefits for which they are entitled and improve utilization among women veterans?

If confirmed, I will strengthen awareness and utilization of benefits among women veterans by ensuring VBA's outreach is coordinated with the Director of the Center for Women Veterans, a retired U.S. Air Force Veteran, who leads VA's efforts in this area. Since January 20, 2025, through our direct outreach with women veterans, we have increased women veteran enrollment by 5%.

- b. How will you examine the Women Veteran Coordinator role at VBA and what can be done to bolster protected time for outreach to women veterans?

I will review the role of Women Veteran Coordinators at VBA regional offices to assess how we can provide them with protected time and resources and outreach. This coordinated approach

will allow VBA to better engage women veterans, increase trust in the benefits process, and ensure they receive the support they have earned.

25. Participation in Title IV programs of the Higher Education Act is a requirement for approval under Title 38 VA education benefits like the GI Bill for accredited institutions. Given the reductions in staffing and funding at the Department of Education, how do you plan to ensure timely approvals?

If confirmed, I will ensure timely approval of institution by strengthening VBA's coordination with the Department of Education, and State Approving Agencies, while assessing whether VBA has the resources needed to meet statutory timeliness.

26. We continue to see fraudulent actors taking advantage of student veterans. How will you ensure VBA is protecting student veterans from deceptive actions and aggressive recruiting?

To protect student veterans, I confirmed, I will reinforce oversight mechanisms, improve data sharing with oversight partners, and ensure proactive communication to help veterans identify and avoid deceptive or aggressive recruiting practices.

27. VBA's Digital GI Bill project and precursor efforts have been challenged in planning, management and oversight since mandated in the Forever GI Bill in 2017. There have been numerous delays and cost overruns since that time.

- a. How will you ensure timely completion of the DGIB project?

If confirmed, my first step will be to assess whether the proper resources—people, process, and technology—are aligned to ensure timely completion.

- b. How will you increase VBA project management and planning to ensure all relevant offices are integrated into the planning of modernization projects from inception?

If confirmed, I will strengthen VBA's project management planning by requiring integration of all relevant offices from the inception of modernization efforts to avoid siloed execution and delays.

- c. Rudisill claims have recently been paused. How do you plan to ensure issues with these claims get resolved so veterans are able to get their additional GI Bill benefits as soon as possible?

If confirmed, I will look into this issue in consultation with VA's General Counsel.

28. The Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) program continues to experience an upward trend in participant numbers, with current projections showing a participant count of nearly 250,000 disabled veterans by Fiscal Year 2027. If confirmed, how will you improve the VR&E program, particularly wait times and access to Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors?

If confirmed, I will assess the need to expand access to vocational rehabilitation counselors by modernizing case management tools, leveraging data analytics to anticipate demand, and strengthening partnerships with education and employment institutions. I will also prioritize workforce planning to ensure we recruit, train, and retain qualified counselors to meet the projected growth of participants. The goal is to provide timely, personalized support so that every veterans has a clear path to meaningful employment and long-term success.

29. Do you agree that VA employees have constitutional rights to petition or communicate with members of Congress and congressional staff about matters related to the Department and that those rights may not be interfered with or denied? Have you ever been involved in any decisions to limit information provided to Congress?

Veterans and employees have constitutional rights to petition or communicate with members of Congress.

30. If confirmed, what would you say to a VBA employee who says they do not feel comfortable reporting waste, fraud, or abuse up their chain of command or to the Office of the Inspector General?

If confirmed, I will ensure whistleblowers are encouraged to come forward and protected from retaliation by taking five key actions. First, I will establish a zero-tolerance policy for reprisals, making it clear that protecting whistleblowers is a leadership priority. Second, I will enhance and publicize confidential reporting channels so employees know where and how to report concerns. Third, I will ensure timely and impartial investigations to reinforce accountability. Fourth, I will hold leaders and supervisors directly responsible for upholding whistleblower protections. Finally, I will foster a culture of trust, transparency, and respect, emphasizing that raising concerns is an act of service to veterans, the public, and the institution.

31. Do you believe the operations of the Veterans Benefits Administration contribute to national security?

Yes. VA's "Fourth Mission" is to enhance the Nation's preparedness for responding to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters. This involves ensuring continued service to Veterans and supporting national, state, and local emergency management, public health, safety, and homeland security efforts. VA serves as the backstop healthcare provider for wounded troops in wartime. VA is also a backstop healthcare provider during national emergencies and served this role during COVID-19.

**Chairman Jerry Moran
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
"Hearing to Consider a Pending Nomination"
September 10, 2025**

**Questions for Dr. Karen L. Brazell, Nominee to be Under Secretary for Benefits,
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

1. You spent two and a half years at SAIC prior to joining VA as a Senior Advisor. As you testified that you were involved with VA's contract review process, and as SAIC holds significant contracts with VA, please describe the steps you took, if any, to mitigate the conflict of interest presented by your previous employment.
2. Please describe your official VA role in reviewing contracts for possible rescission, extensions, and/or new contracts awarded since January.
3. Provide a list of all contracts you reviewed that were assessed for possible rescission, extension, or new contract award. Include the final decision made for each contract. Ensure to distinguish if the contract involved a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business and/or a Veteran-Owned Small Business.
4. Provide a list of all contract decisions or recommendations that you made officially, in writing. Include the final decision made for each contract. Ensure to distinguish if the contract involved a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business and/or a Veteran-Owned Small Business.
5. Please clarify your testimony regarding involuntary removals of VA employees and reduction in force. How many probationary VA employees were involuntarily removed, including those who may have since been reinstated? How many VA employees since January 20, 2025 have been involuntarily removed from employment for disciplinary or other reasons not related to their probationary status? How many VA employees have voluntarily left or will leave VA under Deferred Resignation Program, Voluntary Early Retirement Authority, or another authority this year? What is the size of VA's workforce today as compared to January 20, 2025? Please explain the disparity between these answers and your sworn testimony.
6. As VBA works to bring down the claims backlog, it is inevitable that appeals to the Board of Veterans Appeals will increase. Unfortunately, the Board routinely remands claims back to VBA to correct common errors. If confirmed, how would you work with the Board to end the repetitive cycle of remands?

7. You have extensive experience in IT modernization efforts, which, if confirmed, you could leverage as VBA prioritizes more automation improvements. Would you look at more innovative and off-the-shelf solutions as an alternative to building tools in-house to automate claims and facilitate more telehealth disability exams? Why or why not? Additionally, would you look at cross-departmental federal programs, specifically the Technology Modernization Fund, to help modernize VBA's IT infrastructure? Why or why not?
8. When veterans file claims with VA for disability compensation or other benefits, they often turn to accredited representatives for assistance, like Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), attorneys, or claims agents. Veterans also turn to unaccredited for-profit organizations to assist in their claims. Do you believe the Accreditation, Discipline, and Fees Program should be adjusted to allow for reasonable fees so that more for-profit companies become accredited and can be held accountable by VA, as they assist veterans in their claims?
9. Veterans are often frustrated by the entire process of filing a disability claim, including the distances they must travel for medical disability exams, the unclear status of their claims, and confusing updates about what documentation and materials that claims examiners need to process their claims correctly. If confirmed, how will you make certain that benefits are administered correctly and efficiently, while balancing the need to prevent misuse, mitigate fraud, and avoid unnecessary delays or denials?
10. Over the decades, Congress and VA have taken action to meet the needs of toxic-exposed veterans, most recently through the PACT Act. As science evolves and research further links conditions and exposures, if confirmed, what would be your plan to make certain that VBA quickly adapts to new presumptions of service connection without creating, or heightening, a claims processing backlog?

**Received message of withdrawal of nomination from the President on October 8, 2025.
Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.**

Senator Richard Blumenthal, Ranking Member
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination hearing of Karen Brazell to be Under Secretary for Benefits,
Department of Veterans Affairs
September 10, 2025

1. As Senior Advisor at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), how many contracts did you review? How many of those did you recommend for cancellation or other action?
2. As Senior Advisor, have you reviewed, made recommendations about, or been otherwise involved in any way with Science Application International Corporation (SAIC) contracts?
3. As Senior Advisor, have you reviewed, made recommendations about, or been otherwise involved in any way with contracts between VA and any of your former employers?
4. Provide a list of all contracts you reviewed and made recommendations about in your role as Senior Advisor at VA from January 2025 through September 2025.
5. How many VA employees have been fired, discharged, or had their employment terminated by VA since January 2025, and what percentage of those employees were veterans?
6. Secretary Collins has planned to reduce VA's workforce by 30,000 by the end of this year; As Senior Advisor to Secretary Collins, have you advised the Secretary on how this reduction in workers is impacting VA?
7. If confirmed, how would you address the issue of unaccredited individuals and companies who charge veterans illegal and excessive fees to help with their benefit claims?
8. If confirmed, would you make any reforms to the framework and process VA uses to determine disability ratings?

Received message of withdrawal of nomination from the President on October 8, 2025.
Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

Senator Mazie Hirono
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Nomination of Karen Brazell to be Under Secretary for Benefits
September 10, 2025

Questions for Karen Brazell, Nominee to be Under Secretary for Benefits, Department of Veterans Affairs

1. In your prehearing question responses, you said you would “foster transparent decision-making” if confirmed. If anything, this administration has made efforts to reduce transparency, particularly when it comes to sharing standard information with Congress.
 - a. In your role as Senior Advisor, how have you contributed to increasing Departmental transparency?
 - b. What advice have you given to Secretary Collins regarding communication with Congress?
 - c. How would you, as Under Secretary, increase transparency and communication?
2. We have seen other federal agencies turn program data over wholesale to be used for things like immigration enforcement or targeting of political opponents.
 - a. If consulted, would you consent to allowing VBA data to be used for these purposes?
 - b. Do you believe that kind of usage would be “consistent with VA policy and procedures,” as outlined in your prehearing question responses?
3. The joint goal of this committee and the Department should be ensuring more veterans access more of the benefits they’re entitled to, and it sounded from your testimony like you share that goal.
 - a. As I asked in the hearing, how would you change outreach efforts to ensure veterans not only know what benefits are available to them, but that they also utilize those benefits?
 - b. What considerations should be made for outreach to veterans in rural and remote areas of the country, like the Pacific?
4. During the hearing the issue of contract cancellations came up several times.
 - a. Please clarify how many contracts were or are planned for termination ahead of their scheduled end date.
 - b. Please clarify how many contracts will be functionally cancelled by the Department opting not to renew them this calendar year.
 - c. Please clarify how many contracts will be functionally cancelled by the Department opting not to renew them next calendar year, aggregated by quarter.

- d. Please provide the number of contracts 1) terminated, 2) non-renewed, and 3) scheduled for non-renewal under each of the following programs:
- i. Women-Owned Small Business Federal Contract program;
 - ii. Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business program;
 - iii. 8(a) Business Development Program.

Received message of withdrawal of nomination from the President on October 8, 2025.
Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

**Senator John Boozman
Questions for the Record
Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee
Pending Nomination Hearing
September 10, 2025**

Questions for Dr. Karen Brazell

Dr. Brazell, as you may know, there has been much discussion about improving the VA's disability and compensation claims process.

1. What are your views of the current claims processing ecosystem and what do you see as the biggest challenges affecting it?
2. Do you believe there is a need for additional capacity to assist with claims in the VA disability process?

Received message of withdrawal of nomination from the President on October 8, 2025.
Contact U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs for additional information.

PART I: ALL OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS PART WILL BE MADE PUBLIC

1. Basic Biographical Information

Please provide the following information.

<i>Position to Which You Have Been Nominated</i>	
<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date of Nomination</u>
Under Secretary for Benefits	06/16/2025

<i>Current Legal Name</i>			
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>
Karen	Luann	Brazell	

<i>Addresses</i>					
<u>Residential Address</u> (do not include street address)			<u>Office Address</u> (include street address)		
			Street: 810 Vermont Ave., NW		
<u>City:</u> New Market	<u>State:</u> MD	<u>Zip:</u> 21774	<u>City:</u> Washington	<u>State:</u> DC	<u>Zip:</u> 20420

<i>Other Names Used</i>						
<u>First Name</u>	<u>Middle Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Suffix</u>	<u>Check if Maiden Name</u>	<u>Name Used From</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	<u>Name Used To</u> (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
Karen	Luann	Held		X	02/1964 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	02/1985 Est <input type="checkbox"/>
					Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>

<i>Birth Year and Place</i>	
Year of Birth (Do not include month and day)	Place of Birth
1964	Clark Air Force Base, Philippines

<i>Marital Status</i>					
Check All That Describe Your Current Situation:					
Never Married	Married	Separated	Annulled	Divorced	Widowed
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

<i>Spouse's Name</i> (current spouse only)			
Spouse's First Name	Spouse's Middle Name	Spouse's Last Name	Spouse's Suffix
Kent	Ludwig	Brazell	

<i>Spouse's Other Names Used</i> (current spouse only)						
First Name	Middle Name	Last Name	Suffix	<small>Check if Maiden Name</small>	Name Used From (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)	Name Used To (Month/Year) (Check box if estimate)
None					Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>

<i>Children's Names (if over 18)</i>			
First Name	Middle Name	Last Name	Suffix
Jamie	Alaine	(Brazell) Shortall	
Jacquelin	Dyanne	(Brazell) Farris	

2. Education

List all post-secondary schools attended.

<u>Name of School</u>	<u>Type of School</u> (vocational/technical/trade school, college/university/military college/correspondence/distance/extension/online school)	<u>Date Began School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Ended School</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still in school)	<u>Degree</u>	<u>Date Awarded</u>
Liberty University	University	03/2022 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Est	Doctorate in Strategic Leadership	
University of Phoenix	University	10/1994 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input type="checkbox"/> Est 04/1999 <input type="checkbox"/>	M.A. Organizational Management	08/1997
Chapman University	University	10/1990 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input type="checkbox"/> Est 05/1994 <input type="checkbox"/>	B.S. Computer Science	08/1994
Central Texas College	College (one course)	1984 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Est		
University of Maryland	University (one course)	1989 <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Est		
City College of Chicago	College	06/1986 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input type="checkbox"/> Est 07/1989 <input type="checkbox"/>	A.A.S. Data Processing	07/1989
Cochise Community College	College	09/1990 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	Present <input type="checkbox"/> Est <input type="checkbox"/> 05/1991		
University of Charleston	University	08/1982 <input type="checkbox"/> Est	05/1983 <input type="checkbox"/> Est		

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.

<u>Type of Employment</u> (Active Military Duty Station, National Guard/Reserve, USPS Commissioned Corps, Other federal employment, State Government (Non-federal Employment), Self-employment, Unemployment, Federal Contractor, Non-Government Employment (excluding self-employment), Other	<u>Name of Your Employer/Assigned Duty Station</u>	<u>Most Recent Position Title/Rank</u>	<u>Location</u> (City and State only)	<u>Date Employment Began</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Employment Ended</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still employed)
Federal Employment	Department of Veterans Affairs	Senior Advisor to the Secretary/Non-Career SES	Washington, DC	01/2025 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Federal Contractor	Science Application International Corporation	Vice President, VA Account	Reston, VA	09/2022 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 01/2025
Non-Federal Employment	Eastern Power Solutions, LLC	Advisory Board Member	Suwanee, GA	08/2024 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 01/2025
Federal Contractor	BizFlow, Inc.	Executive Vice President	Falls Church, VA	02/2021 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 09/2022
Federal Employment	Department of Veterans Affairs	Acting Assistant Secretary for the Office of Enterprise Integration/Non-Career SES	Washington, DC	04/2020 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 01/2021
Federal Employment	Department of Veterans Affairs	Principle Executive Director and Chief Acquisition Officer/Non-Career SES	Washington, DC	08/2018 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 01/2021
Federal Employment	Department of the Navy Assistant for Administration	Chief of Staff, White House Military Office	Washington, DC	03/2015 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 08/2018
Federal Employment	Department of the Navy, Naval Facilities Command-Washington Navy Yard	Deputy Director, Acquisition and Resource Integration	Washington, DC	08/2011 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 02/2015
Federal Employment	Department of Navy, Naval Facilities Command-	Chief, Acquisition Program	Washington, DC	10/2010 Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est Present <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> 07/2011

	Washington Navy Yard	Management Branch				
Federal Employment	Department of Navy, Naval Facilities Command-Washington Navy Yard	Program Manager	Washington, DC	11/2006	Est □	Est Present □ □ 10/2010
Federal Contractor	Verizon Federal Network Systems	Senior Consultant	Arlington, VA	08/2004	Est □	Est Present □ □ 11/2006
Federal Contractor	Lockheed Martin Corp.	Systems Engineer	Reston, VA	06/2004	Est □	Est Present □ □ 08/2004
Federal Contractor	Greenway Enterprises, Inc.	Project Manager	Washington, DC	08/2002	Est □	Est Present □ □ 06/2004
Federal Contractor	Johnson Controls Corp.	Site Manager	Washington, DC	08/2000	Est □	Est Present □ □ 08/2002
Federal Contractor	Booz-Allen & Hamilton	Senior Consultant II	McLean, VA	10/1999	Est □	Est Present □ □ 08/2000
Federal Contractor	Brown & Root Services Corp.	Maintenance Manager	Fort Huachuca, AZ	03/1998	Est □	Est Present □ □ 10/1999
Federal Contractor	Brown & Root Services Corp.	Supervisor, Planning & Production Control	Fort Huachuca, AZ	11/1993	Est □	Est Present □ □ 03/1998
Federal Contractor	Crown Support Services, Inc.	Supervisor, Maintenance Support	Fort Huachuca, AZ	07/1990	Est □	Est Present □ □ 11/1993
Unemployed while changing duty stations from GE to AZ				05/1990	Est □	Est Present □ □ 07/1990
Federal Employment	3 rd Infantry Division Property Book Office	Reports Clerk	Kitzingen, GE	06/1988	Est □	Est Present □ □ 05/1990
Active Duty, U.S. Army	3 rd Infantry Division Support Command	Supply Sergeant/E5	Kitzingen, GE	06/1985	Est □	Est Present □ □ 01/1988
Active Duty, U.S. Army	1 st Cavalry Division 1 st Forward Support Battalion	Supply Clerk/E4	Fort Hood, TX	05/1984	Est □	Est Present □ □ 06/1985
Active Duty, U.S. Army	Army Quartermaster School	Private/E2	Fort Lee, VA	03/1984	Est □	Est Present □ □ 04/1984
Active Duty, U.S. Army	Army Basic Training	Private/E2	Fort Dix, NJ	01/1984	Est □	Est Present □ □ 03/1984

(B) List any advisory, consultative, honorary or other part-time service or positions with federal, state, or local governments, not listed elsewhere.

None

<u>Name of Government Entity</u>	<u>Name of Position</u>	<u>Date Service Began</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate)	<u>Date Service Ended</u> (month/year) (check box if estimate) (check "present" box if still serving)	
		Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Est <input type="checkbox"/>	Present <input type="checkbox"/>

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.

- Department of Veterans Affairs Exceptional Service Award, 01/2021
- Department of Defense Secretary of Defense Medal for Meritorious Civilian Service, 08/2018
- Department of the Army, Army Commendation Medal (2nd Oak Leaf Cluster), 07/1985-10/1987
- Department of the Army, Army Achievement Medal (3rd Oak Leaf Cluster), 05/1985-09/1987
- Department of the Army, Army Good Conduct Medal (2nd Oak Leaf Cluster), 01/1984-01/1988

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).

<u>Name of Organization</u>	<u>Dates of Your Membership</u> (You may approximate)	<u>Position(s) Held</u>
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	~03/2024-01/2025	Board Member
National Veterans Small Business Coalition (NVSBC)	07/2023-01/2025	Board Member

Eastern Power Solutions, LLC.	08/2024-01/2025	Advisory Board Member
Project Management Institute	12/2021-02/2025	Member

6. Political Activity

(A) Have you ever been a candidate for or been elected or appointed to a political office?

No

<u>Name of Office</u>	<u>Elected/Appointed/ Candidate Only</u>	<u>Year(s) Election Held or Appointment Made</u>	<u>Term of Service (if applicable)</u>

(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.

<u>Name of Party/Election Committee</u>	<u>Office/Services Rendered</u>	<u>Responsibilities</u>	<u>Dates of Service</u>
Republican National Committee	Professional Volunteer	Backstage Manager	07/2024

(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.

<u>Name of Recipient</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Year of Contribution</u>
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2025
Never Surrender, INC.	\$234.23	2024
TRUMP National Committee JFC, INC.	\$260.25	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$576.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$576.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$192.00	2024
TRUMP National Committee JFC, INC.	\$205.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$576.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
TRUMP Save America Joint Fundraising Committee	\$1,041.02	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Never Surrender, INC.	\$936.92	2024

Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2024
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$200.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$384.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$292.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$576.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$300.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$200.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$200.00	2023
Science Application International Corporation Voluntary Political Action Committee	\$100.00	2020

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.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Publisher</u>	<u>Date(s) of Publication</u>
https://www.linkedin.com/in/karen-b-52278930	LinkedIn	Various from ~2021 to Present

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.

1. 09/16/2020: Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, *Modernizing VA's Medical Supply Chain: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic*, [CREC-2020-09-16-pt1-PgD805.pdf](#)
2. 11/20/2019: Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, *Go-Live March 2020: The Status of EHRM Readiness*, [CPRT-117HRPT-activities-Q1-VR00.pdf](#)
3. 05/22/2019: Subcommittees on Technology Modernization & Health, *MISSION Critical: Caring for Our Heroes*, [CPRT-117HRPT-activities-Q1-VR00.pdf](#),
4. 04/02/2019: Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, *Mapping the Challenges and Progress of the Office of Information and Technology*, [CPRT-117HRPT-activities-Q1-VR00.pdf](#)

(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.

1. 05/30/2025: VA Baltimore National Cemetery, Baltimore, MD, Memorial Day Keynote Speaker. [Thank you to our incredible moderators for guiding thoughtful discussions and fostering engaging conversations throughout the event! | Susan Sharer](#)
2. 12/17/2024: GovTech Connects: VA Digital Healthcare Summit: Mission Success, Priorities & Opportunities, Panel Moderator, National Press Club, Washington, D.C.
3. 12/12/2024: Warrior Rising *Saluting Her Service* Luncheon hosted by JP Morgan Chase, Keynote Speaker, JP Morgan Chase HQ, Washington, D.C.
4. 12/11/2024: Potomac Officer's Club 2024 Healthcare Summit, Speaker, Falls Church Marriott Fairview Park, Falls Church, VA, [2024 Healthcare Summit - Potomac Officers Club](#)
5. 06/03/2024: GovTech Connects: Acquisition at the Speed of Innovation, Speaker, Falls Church Marriott Fairview Park, Falls Church, VA. [Acquisition2024 - GovTechConnects](#)
6. 12/06/2023: Potomac Officer's Club 2023 Healthcare Summit, Speaker and Moderator, Falls Church Marriott Fairview Park, Falls Church, VA, [Health IT, Emerging Tech & UX Take Center Stage at POC's 2023 Healthcare Summit – GovCon Wire](#)
7. 11/10/2023: 2023 National Women Veterans Leadership & Diversity Conference *After the Uniform*, Panel member, Falls Church Marriott Fairview Park, Falls Church, VA. [LIVE Updates from #NWVLD23 - WVIF](#)
8. 05/24/2023: National Veterans Small Business Coalition VETS23 Conference, Panel member, "The Business of Government: Viewpoints from Transformational Women Leaders," Doubletree Hotel and Conference Center, Orlando, FL, [Conference Sessions](#)

9. 12/17/2019: VA Acquisition Workforce Innovation Symposium, "We Will ACT!" Speaker, Gaylord Texan Convention Center, Grapevine, TX. assets.simpleviewinc.com/simpleview/image/upload/v1/clients/grapevine/2019_AWIS_Winter_Conference_Agenda_FINAL_f9eaa17e-03b8-431f-ae3d-128f35d69c11.pdf?utm_source
10. 05/27/2019: VA Loudon Park National Cemetery, Keynote Speaker and Tribute Plaque Dedication, Baltimore, MD. [HBNCC Memorial Day 2019 Schedule \(All\).pdf](#), [Tribute Plaque Dedication to the VA Loudon Park National Cemetery, May 27, 2019 at DuckDuckGo](#)
11. 05/08/2019: DoD/VA & Government Health IT Summit, Defense Strategies Institute, "Leading VA Initiatives Towards Improved Acquisition & Supply Chain Processes," Speaker, [HIT-Official-Agenda-15.pdf](#)

(C) List all interviews you have given to newspapers, magazines or other publications, and radio or television stations (including the dates of such interviews).

1. 01/25/2025: GovTech Connects IGNITE Podcast with Susan Sharer, Chief Executive Officer, [IGNITE Podcast: Driving Innovation in Federal Procurement - GovTechConnects](#)
2. 11/24/2024: FedGov Today, [Industry Insight: Karen Brazell, VP for Veterans Affairs at SAIC](#)
3. 05/15/2021: IBM Center for The Business of Government podcast hosted by Michael Keegan, [Business of Government Hour: A conversation with Karen Brazell – The Business of Government Hour – Podcast – Podtail](#)

9. Agreements or Arrangements

✓ 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.

<u>Status and Terms of Any Agreement or Arrangement</u>	<u>Parties</u>	<u>Date</u> (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).

No

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

Submission for the Record

Statement from Sarah Verardo for the Record:

“When my husband Michael died on 26 August, his VA pay and his Army retirement pay were deposited into our account the very next day, 27 August. Without any notice to me, those payments were then reversed on 9 September, over drafting my account and triggering fees. I had the means to cover it, but many surviving families do not. The lack of communication in that window between a veteran’s death and the start of survivor benefits is unacceptable. Families need clear notice and a process that does not leave them financially blindsided in the midst of grief.”