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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing to Consider HHS, SSA, Tax Court Nominees
As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee is meeting today to consider four nominations for key posts in the administration: Dr. Mary Wakefield to be deputy secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services; Ms. Elizabeth Ann Copeland and Mr. Vik Edwin Stoll to be judges on the U.S. Tax Court, and Mr. LaMont Eanes to be deputy commissioner of the Social Security Administration.

First is Dr. Wakefield, who has served as acting deputy secretary since March of last year. When you ask Dr. Wakefield to describe her role, she'll tell you it's like being the chief operating officer. And that is a demanding role at an agency comprised of eleven operating divisions, including the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the Administration for Children and Families, the Food and Drug Administration, the National Institutes of Health.

Before becoming acting deputy secretary, Dr. Wakefield served for six years as administrator of the Health Resources and Services Administration. She is an expert in rural health, an educator, and a nurse. She's even a former Capitol Hill staffer, which means she understands how to work effectively with Congress. In my view, she is a very well-qualified nominee.

Next are Elizabeth Ann Copeland and Vik Edwin Stoll, both nominated to be judges on the U.S. tax court. These two nominees each have decades of valuable experience in tax law, Ms. Copeland in Texas and Mr. Stoll in Missouri.

For nearly a century, the Tax Court has guaranteed an important level of transparency and due process that protects every American taxpayer. It ensures that all Americans can get a fair and timely hearing on tax disputes before having to fork over a dollar. Without this system, taxpayers would be forced to pay up front and make their case in slower-moving federal courts.

The 19 judges who make up the court have a challenging mission that requires them to travel all around the country to dozens of cities. These judges do indispensable work to ensure that taxpayers' voices are heard and the nation's tax laws are enforced in a fair and effective manner.

Next is Mr. LaMont Eanes, nominated to be deputy commissioner of Social Security. This program is a lifeline for seniors, serving more than 60 million Americans and keeping many of them from falling into poverty. And SSA is a big agency with 1,280 field offices nationwide to meet people's needs. It requires strong, confirmed leadership.

Some have raised questions about this nomination because Mr. Eanes background is not in social insurance or public management. But sometimes, a fresh perspective may be valuable in helping tackle challenges in federal agencies. Mr. Eanes brings significant management and technology expertise from his time in the private sector, which could be highly beneficial to Social Security in delivering the best possible customer service.

Finally, I want to remind the committee that Social Security has not had a confirmed commissioner in place since February 2013. This committee should consider whether or not it is wise to confirm a deputy before a commissioner is confirmed. SSA runs best when its uppermost leadership positions are filled by strong leaders who've been approved by the Senate, but legitimate questions have been raised about the best way to proceed.

So I look forward to discussing that issue with my colleagues, and my hope is the administration puts forward a nominee to be commissioner for the committee to process as soon as possible.

Congratulations to our nominees and thank you for being here today.

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