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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Hearing to Consider IRS Chief Counsel, Social Security and Medicare Public Trustees

As Prepared for Delivery

The Finance Committee meets this morning to discuss an important set of nominations that are instrumental to the federal government's finances.

First is the nomination of Marjorie Rollinson to be Chief Counsel at the IRS. The Chief Counsel's office is responsible for ensuring the agency is implementing tax law by the books. It's difficult to overstate the importance of this responsibility, but I'm pleased that the President has sent the Finance Committee such a qualified nominee. Ms. Rollinson has decades of tax and management experience in both the public and private sector, including several years at the Office of the Chief Counsel that she has been nominated to run. If confirmed, Ms. Rollison would be the first woman to serve as Chief Counsel.

As colleagues are aware, the IRS is waist-deep in its work to issue guidance related to the Inflation Reduction Act. Having a confirmed Chief Counsel will ensure this work is carried out to the letter of the law.

The Chief Counsel's office also has an important role in the IRS' efforts to move away from auditing low-income and middle class Americans and towards complex pass-throughs and wealthy individuals. This goes right to the heart of reality of the tax code: working Americans, most low and middle income, overwhelmingly comply with the law because their information is automatically passed on to the agency through payroll.

On the other side of the coin are these complex passthroughs and other structures often designed by the wealthy specifically for tax avoidance. I expect any Chief Counsel to provide support for the agency's effort to put more attention on billion dollar partnerships rather than low-income individuals, and to ensure legal strategy is sound, as I have little doubt those who have made millions through tax avoidance schemes will be fighting this fresh approach with a legion of lawyers.

It's no secret that Democrats and Republicans have differing views about how the IRS should operate. But the position of the Chief Counsel has historically been one that has received bipartisan support, and it is my hope that will remain true with Ms. Rollinson's nomination. The last Chief Counsel, Michael Desmond, was reported out of the Finance Committee with a 26-2 vote, and was confirmed by the Senate with an 84-15 vote. I urge all of my colleagues to maintain this bipartisan support.

Now, on to the public trustees. The Board of Trustees of the Social Security and Medicare Trust Fund is responsible for issuing annual reports to Congress on the status of the Trust Funds that ensure Americans receive their earned benefits now and into the future.

The Board is made up of six members: the Treasury Secretary, the Secretary of Labor, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the Commissioner of Social Security, as well as two public trustees.

The Board has been without public trustees for over eight years. Unlike most nominations that come before this committee, the public trustees do not represent the views of the President or the agencies they will be managing. The public trustees represent the American people, ensuring their voices and views are represented in the Board's annual reports. The Finance Committee has long held the view that when the term of a public trustee expires, a new public trustee must be nominated to bring fresh views to the Board.

That's going to include insight on emerging trends in Medicare, like how to update and strengthen the Medicare guarantee so it squarely addresses chronic illnesses that are the overwhelming concern for the program and the seniors who count on it. Improving chronic care is an effort that began in this committee on a bipartisan basis with myself and the late, great Senator Orrin Hatch, and I look forward to continuing our work in that bipartisan spirit.

That's why I'm glad to see two new faces before the committee, although they need little in the way of introduction. Tricia Neuman is practically a household name when it comes to Medicare policy and finances as a longtime leader at the Kaiser Family Foundation. She worked in both the House and Senate, and when Americans read news articles about health care policy, it's more likely than not that Ms. Neuman will have been interviewed for her insight.

Demetrios Kouzoukas has been nominated to fill the Republican slot for the public trustee. Mr. Kouzoukas has extensive experience across our federal health programs, serving at both Health and Human Services and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, as well as a variety of roles in the private sector.

Both nominees have the experience needed to represent the public and ensure the integrity of the Board's reports. I'd also like to emphasize that this role requires putting the public interest first, not the interests and values of your day job and other financial relationships. The financial future of both Social Security and Medicare are on the minds of families across the country as well as lawmakers, and work will need to be done to chart a course that will protect and strengthen Americans' earned benefits. I want to thank the trustees for considering this role as it will require dozens of hours of time each year and sweat equity to fulfill this public service.

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