

Senator Zell Miller
CARES Commission Public Hearing Statement
VA Medical Center
Decatur, Georgia
August 28, 2003

First, I'd like to thank the Veterans' Administration and the members of its Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services Commission for holding this hearing in Georgia, where we have more than 770,000 veterans who have served this nation so ably.

We owe the freedom we have today to the brave service of these veterans in Georgia and across the nation. And at a time when more than 150,000 troops are deployed in Iraq, it is especially important and timely for the Veterans' Administration to address the health care and other concerns of our soldiers.

As a proud veteran of the United States Marine Corps, I understand the sacrifices that our military personnel make. Military service should be a career of distinction and honor, and those that serve should be given the resources they deserve. With troops still facing danger and a new generation of veterans using VA health care, ensuring access to health care services has become paramount. However, just as important as accessibility is ensuring that veterans receive health care in a timely manner. We have all heard the stories of veterans waiting six months to see a VA physician. These delays are common across the country and we must address this problem.

In response to the changing face of VA health care, the Veterans' Administration has set up the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) initiative. I applaud the goal of the CARES Commission: To realign services to provide health care to the most veterans possible. It is important for veterans to understand that although the CARES Commission may call for changes in the locations where health care is delivered, it will not reduce health care services to veterans. I believe the result of the Commission's hard work will be more comprehensive and more accessible health care for all our veterans. I realize that these changes will not please everyone, but it is imperative for the Department of Veterans' Affairs to get the most bang out of each taxpayer buck and to operate the most efficient system of veterans' health care without compromising its mission.

We have the best military in the world and our nation's soldiers put their lives on the line for our country every day. Here in Georgia, our soldiers made up the bulk of our troops deployed to the Middle East, and it is critically important for the VA to guarantee that they will have access to quality health care facilities when they return home. So, as the CARES initiative progresses, it is vital for the Veterans' Administration to preserve its commitment to veterans. I will continue to work to make certain that the VA remains dedicated to improving health care for veterans in Georgia and nationwide. It is my hope that Congress and the Administration can work together to find solutions that adequately address VA's budget concerns while still providing the quality health care services that our veterans deserve.

Thank you.

Testimony of Senator Saxby Chambliss
CARES Commission Public Hearing
Decatur, Georgia VA Medical Facility
August 28, 2003

As the CARES Commission Public Hearing convenes in Decatur, GA, I appreciate the Commission extending me the opportunity to insert written testimony for the record. Let me begin by thanking Chairman Alvarez and the entire committee for undertaking this important endeavor. The process of creating a capital strategy for the next twenty years of veterans' healthcare is not an easy one, and I commend each of you on your efforts. In a time of tight budgets, I understand the necessity of realigning capital investments so that the changing veteran population will be served more effectively. It is my hope that through this process, America's veterans will experience improved care and greater access to healthcare facilities.

As you are well aware, our nation's veterans are moving to the South. Georgia is home to well over 750,000 veterans and that number will rise as many of our brave soldiers begin to return from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Many of these soldiers will join the countless veterans that depend on the services that the Veterans Medical Centers provide in Georgia, North Florida, and South Carolina. Additionally, the Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISN) 7 and 8, which serve my constituents in Georgia, have had an overwhelming increase in the veterans' population over the past several years, and it is projected that these increases will continue over the next 20 years. Due to these trends, it seems counterintuitive to reduce the size and scope of any facility where the need is constantly increasing.

I do believe that this trend of southward movement of our country's veterans is reflected relatively well in the overall scope of the VA recommendations that you have received, and I am grateful for the proposal to build eight new outpatient clinics in Georgia. These clinics are desperately needed and would help ease the increasing burden that Georgia's VA hospitals are experiencing. Additionally, as the Commission begins to address the specific needs of the Dublin, Augusta, and Lake City, Florida VAMCs, I would like to take a moment to comment on these specific facilities.

Dublin VAMC

In Dublin, Georgia, over 24,800 veterans will come through the VAMC this year and the enrolled veterans will make upwards of 160,000 outpatient visits in 2003 alone. Because of the quality care that they provide, the demand for their services has increased by roughly 12% each year for the last four years. I am proud of the great work they are doing and I would have grave concerns about any proposals to reduce the medical care that they provide, given this remarkable rise in demand. Specifically, the VA has proposed to reduce the scope of practice for inpatient surgical care by moving some components to other facilities and contracting out some work as well. Unfortunately, this would have a dramatic affect on the quality of care at Dublin, as the surgical care provides a great deal of support for the rest of the components of the hospital. Additionally, the Dublin VAMC has determined that if the inpatient surgical care were to be outsourced, the cost to our nation's taxpayers would be two to four times greater than if it were to remain at Dublin. Remarkably, the VAMC currently does not have a waiting list and we would be remiss to endanger this good record.

Augusta VAMC

The Augusta VAMC is another clinic that is providing outstanding service for veterans in Northeast Georgia and nine counties in South Carolina. I am grateful for the recommendation of several new outpatient clinics to support this hospital, however I would have serious reservations about realigning the services of the Uptown and Downtown Divisions of the facility. It is important to note that the Uptown and Downtown Divisions, while linked under the Augusta VAMC, are two distinct units with two very distinct missions. Both the Uptown and Downtown's divisions remain filled at 85-90% capacity all the time. As you know, the Uptown clinic provides vital care for blind veterans, nursing care, and mental health and if these services are relinquished, there would be no real feasible alternative, as neither the Downtown Division nor the Eisenhower Army Medical Center are equipped to handle these missions. Additionally, twelve years ago, the Uptown clinic underwent a \$150 million renovation to modernize their facilities and equipment and to move any single mission from the Uptown clinic would cost upwards of \$4 million, not including the cost to move whatever mission is replaced in the Downtown Division.

Lake City VAMC

The Lake City VA Medical Center has been providing extraordinary medical care to the veterans in the Northern Florida and Southern Georgia area for many years. Some 36,000 Georgia veterans from 19 counties depend on the services that they provide. As with the Dublin and Augusta VAMCs, I would resist any potential downsize or transfer that would place undue stresses on the access and quality of care that this outstanding clinic provides.

Conclusion

As the CARES Commission prepares to formulate their recommendations for the future of the veterans' healthcare system, I look forward to working with each of you to ensure a strong and viable network of Veterans Health Clinics in Georgia and Northern Florida. The Dublin, Augusta, and Lake City Centers are only a few of the many clinics in Georgia and Northern Florida that are providing the type of outstanding care that our veterans desperately need. I urge you to keep these comments in mind in the coming months. Thank you for your consideration and hard work.