

New York State Nurses Association- United American Nurses
Stratton VA Medical Center, Albany New York

September 11, 2003

To: Mr. Richard E. Larson
Cares Commission, Syracuse, New York

From: Rebecca Johnson, RN, B. S. N.
United American Nurses (U.A.N.) - New York State Nurses Association
(N.Y.S.N.A.), President VISN 2, Albany New York.

I would like to thank the CARES Commission for providing this opportunity for my input towards improving health care services for our veterans.

Yes, we at VISN -2 have been kept informed about the proposed Cares realignment plan to positively influence V. A. care for veterans, including the plans, for special populations. Specifically to build a new thirty (30) - bed spinal cord injury (SCI) D unit at the Syracuse VAMC.

Never the less, I don't want to waste the commissions time on discussing what is done.

We are requesting that you reconsider proposals to close the V.A. hospital in Canandaigua, New York/ VISN 2. We ask that you reassess the criteria used to recommend closure and consolidation.

Canandaigua has two hundred (200) inpatients, thirty (30) acute psychiatry, sixty (60) domiciliary and substance abuse and one-hundred and ten (110) very ill medical patients. They serve eight -hundred (800) seriously mentally ill patients and sixteen-thousand (16,000) outpatient visits per year. Further noted is that their Substance abuse program has demonstrated a 95%-96% success rate ... V.A's Mental health program has been a safe haven for the mentally ill .-- Other programs have had similar type track records.

Today's date, marks two years post "911". Our veterans are fighting battles in many places. If we can plan to add \$87 billion dollars to pay for operations in Iraq, let us now fight to keep Canandaigua !

Keep it open to provide the most needed services to "Americas Hero's our precious Veterans.

Certainly it is a challenge to continue to do more with less-but our nurses , health care providers and staff have accomplished this.

We would ask that a strategy/plan to keep this fine facility open be developed.

Let us always speak for the betterment of the Veterans, as the veterans by their courageous actions have forever spoken for " America" and a Broad !

Respectively submitted, Rebecca Johnson RN ,President -UAN / NYSNA VISN 2

Testimony presented to
CARES COMMISSION
Proposed Closure of the Canandaigua VAMC
By
Colleen M. Combs, RN
&
President AFGE Local 3306
October 20, 2003

Good Afternoon Ladies & Gentlemen:

My name is Colleen M. Combs and I live and work in Ontario County in upstate New York with my family. I am a Registered Nurse and I am also the President of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) Local 3306 here at the VA Medical Center. I represent all of the licensed professional staff at the Canandaigua facility. The professionals that I represent are concerned and anxious about the negative impact the proposed closure would have on veterans, working families and all other stakeholders.

Each VA facility has its own uniqueness and charm, but no other facility has the beauty of the Canandaigua campus in the heart of the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York.

The Canandaigua VA is in the process of completing a \$5 million dollar renovation project to modernize patient care environments to keep pace with the increasing healthcare needs of the veteran population. Nicely heated, well-lit tunnels connect the entire facility. This makes transporting long term care and psychiatric patients easier during the long and hard upstate New York winters. In addition, the two center courts provide a safe environment for therapeutic patient activity, as well as physical & behavioral rehabilitation.

Canandaigua is a growing suburban community of Rochester and is the closest VA facility, within 30 miles of the Rochester area,

where the greatest concentration of veterans live in western New York. In fact, Canandaigua is not only the closest VA facility, but is the facility most preferred and utilized in the Rochester area. We have received the highest customer satisfaction scores in the nation. (see attachment)

We are close to the New York State Thruway and accessible to public transportation. This area is growing, with continued projected growth over the next 20 years in Monroe and Ontario counties. The current VISN 2 proposal to close the Canandaigua facility directly contradicts the standards and principles of CARES, to improve access to care by increasing the travel distance for patients to 60-80 miles to Bath, Batavia, or Syracuse. It is unreasonable to believe that this proposal is the right thing to do for our veterans or employees. This proposal also calls for a series of three (3) Reductions in Force (RIF), violating CARES standards and the disruption of 800 working families. Under the law, the VA must provide long term care for

veterans with 70% service connected disability and to other veterans as space is available. The VA, by planning to close our facility is making a significant and adverse policy change under the guise of planning for space. By closing our nursing home care beds the VA is saying there will be NO beds available for the 70% service connected or any other veterans. If as VA's own data projects, there will be a huge surge in elderly veterans in 2012 and 2022, then shouldn't we be planning for the long term care needs of the veterans?

The amended VISN 2 CARES proposal to close the Canandaigua facility is nothing more than an administrative exercise, without thought and without stakeholder input. There is NO plan in place to care for our 776 seriously mentally ill patients, and our 200 long-term care, domiciliary, substance abuse patients and the outpatients seen here for over 16,000 visits annually. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THESE PATIENTS and THEIR FAMILIES? They are a very fragile part of our society requiring a strong support network

of healthcare professionals and mental health services that they are trusting of and familiar with. Disabled veterans without consistent care and support risk homelessness and greater illness. I feel that services provided to veterans are vital to their health and self-sufficiency. Closing the Canandaigua VAMC would result in the termination of those services by the hospital that is closest to where the majority of veterans and their families reside. This would also cost more money and put more stress on already taxed community services while failing to provide patient education, prevention of illness and continuity of care for our veterans.

I and the 200 professionals that are represented by the American Federation of Government Employees Local 3306, believe that the Department of Veterans' Affairs has made a gross error in judgment by proposing to close the Canandaigua facility. I urge the Commission to modify the plan to allow the Canandaigua VA to continue to meet the

current and future long-term care needs of veterans.

I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony at this hearing and am confident that the CARES Commissioners will make the right decision in the best interest of veterans, working families and all other stakeholders associated with the Canandaigua VA Medical Center.

In closing, I would like to share

A VETERANS PRAYER

YOU CALLED AND I ANSWERED.
I GAVE MY ALL.

I LEFT MY BOOKS, MY DESK
MY MACHINE, MY STORE
YES, I EVEN LEFT MY MOM & DAD
MY WIFE & KIDS- MY ENTIRE FAMILY.

I PUT MY LIFE ON HOLD

BECAUSE YOU NEEDED ME.
I DID NOT HESITATE TO
ANSWER YOUR CALL

I WENT TO FOREIGN LANDS
WITHOUT QUESTION ON YOUR
COMMAND.

THERE TOO I LEFT MANY THINGS
BEHIND-
MY FOOT, MY LEG, MY ARM, MY EYES.
YES- EVEN MY MIND.

I LEFT MY LIFE, MY FAMILY,
MY HAPPINESS.

NOW, I'M ASKING FOR HELP.
FOR ME AND MINE.

PLEASE DEAR GOD
DON'T LET AMERICA TURN IT'S BACK
ON ME.

Author: Ralph Calabrese Korea War Veteran

Thank you.

Colleen M. Combs, RN

Colleen M. Combs, RN
President AFGE 3306



**A CHEER ... to the VA
Medical Center in
Canandaigua and its
Rochester outpatient clinic,
both of which rated higher**

than other VA hospitals in western New York in a survey of veterans. The survey ranked patients' overall satisfaction with the helpfulness/courtesy of the staff, and whether they were getting their medical needs met. The combined rating for the two facilities was 82.47 percent, some 4 points higher than the average in upstate New York, and almost 10 points higher than the national average.

The Canandaigua facility alone rated 85.18 percent, beating out VA hospitals in Buffalo, Bath, Syracuse and Albany. That's a solid tribute to the people who work here.

Cares Commissioners Visn 2 Canandaigua

Dear Commissioners:

I am pleased that the Cares Commission has altered the hearing site for the plan to close Canandaigua VA hospital. I have read your web site and some of the plans seem to make sense and it must have taken considerable time that those individual VISN sites to have met with interested stake holders and Veterans Service Organizations. I personally am against any closure of any VA. My feeling is that they were built for a reason.

The property on Fort Hill Avenue, in Canandaigua, was given to the U.S. Government by the late Mrs. Thompson, for the sole purpose of benefiting Veterans who served their country. The last 70 years have brought witness to that purpose. Canandaigua VA over these years has had many programs and has altered its mission on several occasions to comply with new laws and rules on Veterans care. We here have not always agreed with the decisions that alter the focus of our mission, but have diligently complied.

We now have several floors and buildings dedicated to Nursing Home Veterans and medical rehabilitation areas. We have an Alzheimer's unit that provides round the clock coverage for qualified Veterans and family programs on how to deal with this disease. Our Psychiatric areas we care for psycho-geriatric and Veterans who need acute crisis intervention requiring short term admissions. We also have a PR RTP program that in addition to alcohol or drug related issues that we deal with their psychiatric issues also. We have a Domiciliary with several area work sites, which give our Veterans and new chance in life to make themselves productive citizens in the community. We also hire several of the Veterans in our on site Laundry, housekeeping, grounds maintenance and Nursing. Our outpatient treatment program is second to none, treating roughly 8,000 Veterans last year. We have several Day Treatment programs in our facility, which provide 8 hour a day programs for our Veterans that are bused in from outlying homes.

We have held the highest score for JACHO accreditation and we are the first in Customer service. Why then would the National Cares Commission recommend closing of Canandaigua VA Hospital? Let us then look at the proposal (1) the plan calls for Canandaigua closure and an outpatient clinic. There is no plan available to construct an outpatient clinic in Canandaigua or the immediate area. It has not even been put into a 5-year plan. (2) While Nursing home care beds do increase by the plan. Closing Canandaigua and relocating these beds to Bath is not supported by veteran population changes in the CARES data. (3) 8,200 Veterans were seen at the Canandaigua campus verses the Rochester Outpatient Clinic. (4) There are equivalent to 724 employees at Canandaigua who will suffer a job loss causing a large economic impact on the Finger Lakes and town of Canandaigua. (5) Yes, there are three empty buildings of which two were to be leased out by the end of the year. It must also be known that to sit idle the empty buildings would cost a total of \$76,000 annually. If CARES is to look at monetary savings then why with the plan presented to Cares about closing Batavia employee cost

was not even considered as part of the savings? Also one would have to question why there are 250,000 homeless veterans. (6) Canandaigua does lease considerable space. We have 7 current entities that will not be able to continue operations if Canandaigua closes.

I feel the plan is at best faulty and should be scrapped. William Feeley has obviously made a very hasty and wrong decision. I believe that none of these issues were ever addressed and when on station he (William Feeley) was only here to sell his plan and it became very clear he would listen to no one. He had no plan to open a clinic or even where it would be located. He requested no input on his plan and made a decision based on misinformation. It is time to set Mr. Feeley straight and take Canandaigua VA off the list. Feeley's Follies must end.

Dan Verstrete
Divisional President SEIU Local 200 united
Employee for 28 years and dedicated to taking care of Veterans

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Daniel Verstrete". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name and title.



AMERICAN FEDERATION OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

LOCAL 491
AFFILIATED WITH THE AFL-CIO
P.O. Box 491
Bath, New York 14810



September 8, 2003

Mr. Richard E. Larson
Executive Director
Cares Commission

Mr. Larson,

I am pleased to have the opportunity to address the commission on the very important issue of closing the Canandaigua VA Medical Center. I am truly troubled with this proposal at a time when we as a country are involved in two conflicts that are very different from any this country has faced before. Both of these conflicts have the very real potential to produce many casualties of a kind we have not faced before.

The issue of Canandaigua having a lot of wasted or under utilized space is a management and government created issue with the severe under funding of the VA system being the main driving factor. The VA only serves around 40% of the eligible veterans in this area and the veteran population is getting older and sicker. If we close this VA the veterans will have to travel farther for care at a time when they are less capable of the travel. This issue could be better address with some changes with the rules for renting or leasing the space. As for the number of veterans being treated this problem is also created by the lack of funding since the VA has seen basically 10 plus years of budget cuts and currently does not have the resources to treat the patients that we see properly.

It is my personal belief that the proposed closing is politically driven and motivated. Management has now and has always had the means to operate efficiently.

The veterans this VA serves are not transferred between care givers very well and do not respond well to being shifted around. These patients will feel abandoned by their country and government again.

The government has a responsibility to this community as well which I do not think is being taken into consideration. There have been reports and talk about building an outpatient clinic here but there is no proposal for this to happen. Even if one came forward the talk was for a Monday through Friday clinic 8hrs a day. This is not how these veterans get sick or need care.

Again I thank you for giving me the opportunity to state my opinion.

James Barros- President
AFGE Local 491

TO DO FOR ALL THAT WHICH NONE CAN DO FOR ONESELF

Good afternoon, I would like to thank this commission for allowing me to testify before you and your distinguish guests. My name is LeRoy Bauer, Chairperson of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 200 United. I represent 450 Service, Maintenance, Licensed Practical Nurses and the Technicians at the Syracuse VA Medical Center and surrounding Community Based Out-Patient Clinics.

I asked myself what does CARES stand for? We all know what the acronym means but, do we understand what Care really means? Webster's dictionary defines Care as, "to feel interest or concern". The CARES project has certainly raised a lot of interest and concern in patients and employees alike, as well as many local businesses that will also be impacted by the closure of the Canandaigua VA Medical Center.

I am very concerned because this could be just the beginning of more and deeper cuts, such as was the case during the early 70's and 80's with the multitude of base closures. As we all know, this has decimated many small towns, for example Glasgow, Montana. Their population went from over 10,000 to under 3,000. I lived through that and the economic disaster it created. So if seven VA Medical Centers are closed now will it be 30 the next round? Closing the Canandaigua VA will have the same devastating effects for the Finger Lakes area that the base closure had for Glasgow.

I am a Vietnam Vet and I was made a promise that I could rely on the Veterans Affairs for medical care for the rest of my life. Is this a true statement today? As most of us now know, Category 8's are no longer on the VA's radar screen. Will we be facing even more restrictions and cuts so that only service connected veterans will be treated? No one ever said we had to be injured or service connected to be treated but that seems to be the course that is being taken today.

If you close the Canandaigua Medical Center you will place an undue hardship on the veteran population to seek their care elsewhere. Most of those will be elderly WWII vets, and Korean, and Vietnam vets that are in their late 50's and 60's, such as myself. You will be asking these veterans to travel longer distance for their care, many of whom are on a fixed income and most likely will be unable to afford the added expense. The influx of additional patients to other facilities will certainly affect the waiting times for the rest of VISN 2 and add more demands to provide quality care with an already limited workforce.

Veterans have sacrificed much in order to defend this great country. They have missed time with their families, had economic losses and in some instances, have made the ultimate sacrifice for their nation and our freedom. Is it right that the government is now turning it's back on these hero's, without whom, this country may not have been what it is today. Cost is being sited as the reason for closing the VA hospitals but that price pales in comparison to the sacrifices that some, if not all veterans, have made serving their country. I ask you, can we give the care necessary when those young men and woman return from Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas of conflict throughout the world if we allow even one VA Medical Center to close? We need to be adding services, not eliminating them.

The President has asked for 87 billion dollars to be used to rebuild Iraq and assist the citizens of that country. If we can afford to spend billions of dollars on foreign nations but cut budgets of necessary programs in this country, what is that saying to the citizens of this nation? This country will not tolerate services to our veterans being cut while needed funds are being spent on foreign countries. The solution would be to simply cut a small portion of the aid that is being sent overseas and re-direct to needed programs at home.

I am also concerned for my fellow workers at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center. These employees provide much needed services to the veterans of the Finger Lakes area. They provide good quality care that is greatly appreciated by the many veterans that they care for. Where are 700 employees going to find jobs in this economy? People are scrambling for jobs in this region. Upstate New York has already lost thousands of jobs. These are highly trained employees with good paying jobs that support their families and the community. I do not believe the Finger Lakes region can take another lost of this magnitude.

In conclusion I would ask that this commission reconsider the decision to close any VA Medical Center and place our nations veterans at a disadvantage. Many of these same veterans are also employees at these very Medical Centers slated for closure.

I would also like to thank the commission for allowing me to testify this afternoon.

LeRoy Bauer, LPN
Chapter Chairperson, SEIU Local 200 United
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