

*Coatesville**Paul I*

TESTIMONY OF
CONGRESSMAN PAUL E. KANJORSKI

CARES COMMISSION

HEARING ON THE CARES PROCESS
COATESVILLE VA FACILITY

THURSDAY, AUGUST 28, 2003

Members of the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission, thank you for allowing me to appear before you today. As you are no doubt aware, while the CARES process is underway, many medical facilities have taken this opportunity to assess the services they provide and the quality with which they deliver these services. One such facility is the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center located within my Congressional District. I am happy to be here today to testify on behalf of this excellent facility.

The main reason I have some apprehension about the CARES process initiated by the Veterans Affairs Department is because I experienced the 1995 Base Realignment and Closure Commission (BRAC) process under the Department of Defense. The Department of Defense initially determined that the Tobyhanna Army Depot was not under consideration for closure, but the BRAC Commission decided on its own to put Tobyhanna at risk. It took thousands of dollars and countless hours of preparation to make the case that Tobyhanna was a valuable asset to the Defense Department. In the event that the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is put at risk, I want to make sure our community is prepared.

I have also been around Washington long enough to know that commissions tend to take on a life of their own and can act unpredictably. In the case of CARES, the VA has contracted out the analysis of current and future veterans' health care needs to a consulting firm that may not have a deep understanding of the real needs of our nation's veterans. I therefore want to make sure that this consulting firm and the CARES Commission understand how important the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center is to the 250,000 veterans in its service area and the entire community.

I have long been a supporter of the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center, working diligently during the 1990s to secure \$48 million for much-needed renovations at the facility, completed in 2000. Being as objective as I can, I would hope that this renovation project for the medical center would ensure its long-term survival. In addition, this Center is the only hospital serving veterans 19 counties in Pennsylvania.

As the population of our citizens gravitates toward the south and west, so have resources for facilities within the VA system. When we were preparing our request to the Clinton Administration for the \$48 million renovation for Wilkes-Barre's Center, we reviewed the VA major construction budget for previous years.

We discovered that in 1995, as an example, only one major construction project was planned for the Northeast while \$176.6 million was planned for expenditure in places like Phoenix, Arizona and Gainesville, Florida. Pennsylvania has the highest concentration of veterans per capita of any state, and the veterans who remain here are likely less wealthy and probably less healthy than those who have relocated to the Sunbelt.

I recognize the need for the VA to respond to the changing needs of veterans by improving access to health care through outpatient services. I urged the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center to open a clinic in Berwick, and the response has been so overwhelming that the clinic recently expanded its contract to serve 1,400 veterans. However, as our veterans age and require additional health services, I believe it is important to maintain in-patient care through a full-service hospital in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

Users and supporters of the Wilkes-Barre VA demonstrated their support for our facility by participating in a tremendously successful petition drive to "Save the Wilkes-Barre VA." All in all, the petition garnered approximately 30,000 signatures. In April, I met with Secretary Anthony Principi of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. At this meeting, I personally delivered the petitions that more than 30,000 people in Northeastern Pennsylvania signed to keep the hospital open for our veterans. In addition, I urged the Secretary to spare the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center from any threat of closing or cutbacks as the VA evaluates its entire health care delivery system, and he said he would seriously consider that option.

Nevertheless, I know that this status could change as the process moves forward. Therefore, as the CARES program is fully implemented, it is my hope that the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center will be able to continue its efforts of providing veterans in Northeastern Pennsylvania world-class health care well into the 21st Century.

Thank you again for allowing me to testify before you today. I look forward to continuing to work with both the Wilkes-Barre VA and with the CARES commission to ensure that the veterans of Northeastern Pennsylvania get the excellent healthcare that they need and have earned.