

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

August 21, 2003

Hon. Everett Alvarez, Jr.  
Chairman, CARES Commission  
810 Vermont Ave, NW (00CARES)  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As you begin your independent review of the draft national plan to improve health care services for veterans, we write to express concern for the future of the Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center in Waco, Texas.

The Waco center has a long, rich history of service to veterans from across America. It is the only in-patient, long-term psychiatric hospital in Texas providing care for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and chronic and severe mental illness. The Waco center also provides rehabilitation for blind and hearing-impaired veterans. Most of the center's buildings have been renovated within the past 10 years at a cost of approximately \$80 million. These facilities are in excellent condition and can easily expand their services. Our military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and globally against terrorism mean the ranks will grow of veterans who need medical care. The Waco facility can accommodate them.

The community and city leadership in Waco and McLennan County are prepared to work creatively with the VA to reduce the operational costs at the hospital. This may include public-private partnering, leasing out of excess facilities, or moving other VA or government operations in leased facilities into the Waco VA hospital campus. All of these approaches have proven successful in the past in reducing operational costs at military bases such as Ft. Sam Houston and Brooks Air Force Base in San Antonio.

We are proud of the longstanding, warm relationship between the VA center and the City of Waco. A VA facility can only care for patients with special needs if it has the clear backing of its neighboring community. The compassionate, supportive climate in Waco for veterans and their families has evolved over 70 years and would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate anywhere else in the state.

We ask you to fully weigh the Waco center's unique capabilities and sound standing in the community as you consider your recommendations to Secretary Principi.

Sincerely,



Kay Bailey Hutchison  
U.S. Senator



John Cornyn  
U.S. Senator



Chet Edwards  
Member of Congress

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 28, 2003

The Honorable Everett Alvarez, Jr.  
CARES Commission Chairman  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW (00CARES)  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As you continue to assess and revise the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) draft Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) plan, we would like to express our deep concern over proposed changes at the Big Spring VA Medical Center that would adversely affect West Texas veterans.

As you know, the current proposal calls for immediately discontinuing surgical services at Big Spring and studying terminating all health care services at the facility. We believe that both ideas are short-sighted and contrary to the VA's mission to provide important health care services to veterans in all areas of the country. Approximately 72,000 veterans are currently served by the West Texas VA Center, centrally located in Big Spring and serving 47 counties. The patient load and number of medical visits in Big Spring has steadily risen over the past few years, and a broad range of specialty health care, surgical services, and long term care are desperately needed to address the varied medical concerns of the veteran community in West Texas.

The Big Spring campus is particularly valuable for its central location among the major population centers in the region. Actions to permanently discontinue surgical health care services could require elderly or disabled veterans to travel 222 miles to Amarillo or 430 miles to Albuquerque for important surgical procedures. To thousands of veterans in rural, medically-underserved areas, the closure would result in not just an inconvenience or need to delay their health care decisions, but could mean the complete elimination of their best health care options. We are deeply concerned over the repercussions the closure would have on the thousands of veterans who depend on these vital services.

We are committed to working with you to ensure that the brave men and women who risked their lives to defend our freedom continue to receive the quality health care they earned through their service. We respectfully request that you give full consideration to our views, and the vital contributions that the Big Spring VA Medical Center makes to West Texas veterans as you make your final recommendations to Secretary Principi.

Sincerely,

  
KAY BAILEY HUTCHISON  
United State Senator

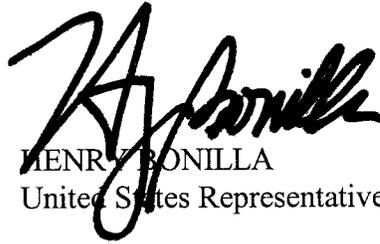
  
JOHN CORNYN  
United States Senator

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510



CHARLIE STENHOLM  
United States Representative



HENRY BONILLA  
United States Representative



RANDY NEUGEBAUER  
United States Representative

The Honorable Stevan Pearce  
Member of Congress  
New Mexico, District 2

As I travel through Southern New Mexico, I regularly hear from veterans about the long waits and long ways they have to travel to receive treatment from the VA. They generally don't complain about the quality, but they always mention the trouble in gaining access.

Even though there are four community based outpatient clinics in Southern New Mexico, many veterans still have to travel to Albuquerque and/or El Paso for treatment due to the lack of extensive services available at the outpatient clinics.

It is often difficult and inconvenient for many disabled veterans to travel for long periods of time, not to mention costly. Since the outpatient clinics are not able to offer many of the services veterans require, veterans must travel long distances to the major facilities for treatment and frequently spend a whole day traveling back and forth.

To help alleviate some of the traveling and waiting periods, I propose using some of the facilities at Memorial Medical Center in Las Cruces to provide care for veterans instead of having them travel to Albuquerque or El Paso. I would strongly encourage the VA to look at the possibility of contracting with Memorial Medical Center to give veterans the option of seeking treatment at that facility.

Additionally, the number of veterans in the Roswell area has been growing rapidly. Currently, many of the Chaves County veterans travel to Artesia for treatment. However, many of these veterans traveling to Artesia are now encountering extensive delays in receiving treatment. I would strongly encourage the VA to look at the establishment of an outpatient clinic in Roswell to serve those veterans in that area.

The VA staff at the Artesia outpatient clinic appear to be overburdened and unable to properly deal with the high number of veterans seeking care at that facility. For example, in fiscal year 2002, there were a total of 2,162 visits to the Artesia outpatient clinic. As of June 30 of this year, there were already 1,875 visits to Artesia.

Another suggestion to help shorten the lengthy travel for veterans would be to reallocate the travel reimbursement funds and use them to contract locally. In other words, instead of traveling to Albuquerque and/or El Paso veterans would be able to use those funds for contracting out with local doctors or medical facilities to receive treatment locally.

As the Commission prepares to make a final recommendation to Secretary Principi, I hope it will consider the difficulties that many veterans face with regards to access to treatment in rural America and especially in Southern Mexico. I understand resources are scarce, but I believe by adopting these recommendations access can be improved while maintaining a high level of quality of care for veterans in Southern New Mexico without requiring them to travel long distances.

Thank you for the opportunity to express my views on improving access to the VA for veterans in Southern New Mexico. Thank you for the important work you are doing on the Commission.

MAC THORNBERRY  
13TH DISTRICT  
TEXAS



ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

BUDGET COMMITTEE

SELECT COMMITTEE  
ON HOMELAND SECURITY

# Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

July 22, 2003

Mr. Richard E. Larson  
Executive Director, Care's Commission  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, Northwest  
Washington, D.C. 20420-0001

Dear Mr. Larson,

Today there are many men and women putting their lives on the line for the safety of our country, and the security of our freedom, we want to make sure that we show support for these Americans by the way we care for those who have gone before them.

- Many services not provided by the Amarillo VA Healthcare System cause undue hardship on the veterans in this district. These veterans are required to travel to Big Spring, El Paso, Lubbock, or Arizona to receive specific medical treatment not available in Amarillo, Texas.
- The Amarillo community has a wide base of medical resources that could be utilized for the veterans in our area. A few of these are mental health, substance abuse, severe orthopedic treatment and severe ophthalmic treatment.

Utilization of the community medical resources could reduce costs, stress for the veteran, and staff required to maintain these resources at the Amarillo VA Healthcare system.

Additionally, this plan could reduce the amount of time a veteran has to wait to receive an appointment for treatment.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute my recommendations to this CARES Commission.

Sincerely,

Mac Thornberry  
Member of Congress

WMT:nbs