

VA Testimony of Congressman Ernie Fletcher – September 8, 2003

I would like to thank Secretary Principi and the CARES commissioners for inviting me to testify before this hearing to speak on behalf of Kentucky's Veterans.

I am here today to say I share the disappointment and dismay of thousands of Central Kentucky Veterans. We should not be sitting here today because a promise was made 4 years ago to make every attempt to keep Leestown open. Today, we find that promise to our citizens has been broken. It is still my firm belief that the promise made to keep Leestown open can be kept if the VA uses better planning and thinks outside the box.

Much progress has been made in 4 years and Director Farley is to be commended for his efforts on behalf of Veterans. Despite difficult circumstances, he has thought outside the box with a unique two-campus facility, and has continued to provide services and economically turned the Lexington facility around. We have to build on these successes and should not abandon progress for our Veterans.

It is important to recognize the distinctive role played by both facilities. The facility on Cooper Drive offers valuable tertiary and primary care for our Veterans. Its proximity to the University of Kentucky Medical Center provides a critical

healthcare partner for our patients. The Leestown facility is recognized for its effective mental health services and long-term care.

The VA has made substantial investments in both facilities, which suggests it makes sense to use them instead of divesting or closing them down. Their location in Central Kentucky is essential for Veterans in 37 Kentucky counties. To close either would be a disservice to Kentucky's Veterans.

Lexington Veterans Affairs Medical Center cares for more than 30,000 Veterans each year, well over 5,000 admissions and 200,000 outpatient visits. I want to stress our Veteran base in Central KY will only continue to grow. Veterans are living longer, fuller lives, and the quality of life in Central Kentucky are all factors which highlight the need to keep services in this area for this needy population.

This hearing is important because it appears the VA does not have a complete vision for the future – and this lack of thorough planning will surely impact the access and quality of care Veterans in Central Kentucky will receive for decades to come.

In planning, the VA must be more inclusive of other points of view and incorporate input. The VA should clearly and extensively outline a plan or optional plans and then ask for input.

And while we recognize that the Leestown process attempts to include outside opinions and ideas, we also feel that the information is inadequate and very short on details in terms of long-term costs and how a potential closure will directly impact veterans. Some Veterans in Central Kentucky feel the VA only wants to elicit a minimum response because their minds and the decision have been finalized.

I am concerned that just a year ago, the VA laid out ideas to eventually divestiture Lexington Cooper Drive and redirect Lexington acute in-patient medicine and surgery to Louisville. The plan also proposed contracting out the remainder of the services and realigning the Leestown campus to provide primary and outpatient mental health services, selected specialty services, outpatient diagnostics, and nursing home care. It would ultimately function as the acute and long-term psychiatric care center for the entire North market.

Today, the proposal is to cut Leestown and possibly redirect services to Cooper Drive. Although Cooper Drive provides the premium in modern tertiary care, it is currently unable to offer the expanded services necessitated by the closure of Leestown. Anyone visiting the Cooper Drive facility can already see the problems with parking and overcrowding. Cooper Drive would have to expand its current facility by two stories and much of its healthcare services would be

outsourced to other locations, including essential mental healthcare. Long-term psychiatric care is now in Murfreesboro TN.

Now with the current proposal to close Leestown, will the VA add more services at Lexington Cooper Drive, add parking to accommodate increased traffic, or add physical space to accommodate thousands of new patients? Where will the funds come from for other VISN projects like the Louisville tower?

After 4 years of progress in Central Kentucky, a vision is still lacking to keep Cooper Drive and Leestown Road VA Centers open and operating for the good of our Veterans. The commission should examine maintaining operations at Leestown Road and leasing available space to the Commonwealth of Kentucky or to private companies – a plan that would save the VA money. The funds, with some strategic planning, could then be reinvested in the local community to build a CBOC and to make Leestown Road more self-sufficient. The easiest decision for the panel is to simply close Leestown, but it is not the smartest, most financially prudent, and does not put the long-term healthcare needs of Central Kentucky's Veterans first.

Since the CARES commissioners will not personally hear from Veterans, I ask you to read carefully and compassionately their concerns and needs.

Our military men and women have served our nation proudly and we cannot forget the sacrifices they made on our behalf. Whether storming the beaches of Normandy, the jungles of Vietnam or the sands of Persian Gulf, these brave soldiers have sacrificed much so that we may have unparalleled freedoms. Their commitments to God and Country must never be forgotten nor should our commitment to their quality healthcare.