

Good morning. I am Mary Kay Hollingsworth, spokesperson for the Save the VA Task Force in Lake City, Florida. With me this morning are: Board of County Commissioners Chairman Ron Williams, City of Lake City Mayor Ray Kirkland, Genie Norman, former VA employee and County Veteran Service Officer Bob Little. Also joining us in the audience are Harvey Campbell, Tourist Development Director, Jim Poole, Chamber of Commerce Director, Joe Cone, City of Lake City Manager, Stevie Landon, Secretary for the Florida Republican Party and Kerry Hagler, Lake City Community College Media Productions.

Our community was honored to have members of this esteemed Commission visit the Lake City VA Medical Center in July and candidly discuss the CARES Commission role and observations. We hope the on-site visit provided you with the necessary insight to make a positive final recommendation for Lake City.

The Draft National Plan, submitted to you, by Under Secretary of Health, Dr. Roswell, on

August 4th, recommended the transfer of current inpatient surgery services to Gainesville. Nursing Home Care and out-patient services would remain in Lake City.

Although we are pleased with the recommendation, we would respectfully request the CARES Commission consider the following suggestions for inclusion in your final report:

Evaluate relocation of inpatient psychiatry services from Gainesville – which would maximize the utilization of the recently renovated unit in Building 38 at Lake City.

Evaluate relocation of post-surgical and other rehabilitation services from Gainesville to Lake City which would allow additional surgical admissions.

Evaluate the expansion of outpatient (ambulatory) surgery at the Lake City facility, which would reduce patient waiting times at Gainesville and enhance surgical training programs.

We believe Dr. Roswell made the best decision in recommending the continuation of 24 hour inpatient/outpatient services at Lake City. While we applaud this recommendation, we feel

the Lake City facility offers adequate space to accommodate the above mentioned enhancements. The Draft National Plan further recommends the construction of a 238 bed tower in Gainesville, which would eliminate serious patient privacy deficiencies and additional needed space for outpatient specialty clinics. We believe our suggestions for enhancement of services at Lake City could immediately alleviate crowding and reduce waiting times for surgical and rehab services which are currently provided at Gainesville. We realize that any of these suggested changes would require review of staffing and funding needs. In the continued best interest of veterans, these recommendations would truly maximize the resources available at both facilities and continue the integration of services.

In closing, we appreciate the opportunity to address the Draft National Plan and to make our suggestions to you for enhanced services at the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System.

Thank you Chairman and members of the Commission. It is an honor to address you this morning.

I endorse the presentation made by the Save the Lake City VA task force members and hope that you will consider the recommendations to enhance services at this wonderful facility.

The Lake City VA has served veterans from 54 counties in North Florida and South Georgia for over 80 years and will continue to provide the much needed medical care to the 36,000 enrolled veterans.

I must say that although this has been a bumpy ride, I am pleased with the VHA recommendations to the Commission, keeping the Lake City VA as a 24 hour 7 day a week facility. The outstanding support we have received from our communities serviced by the VA has been overwhelming. Congressional interest and support has been extremely gratifying. We were pleased at the outpouring of support for our VA – 80,000 post cards opposing any change in mission were signed and mailed within 10 days. Demand for additional signatures – 6,000 to be exact – required us to develop a petition for those who missed out on the post card signing. Over 400 people from throughout the area came to show their support during the peaceful demonstration that occurred the day of your visit. I can't recall such a time of unity in our community. It is refreshing to see little ol' Lake City truly shine when our veterans needed us the most.

Again, I hope that when your final recommendations are forwarded to Secretary Principi, you will include the enhancements outlined by the previous presentation for the North Florida/South Georgia Integrated Health System. The additional services that could be provided at the Lake City VA would be a viable solution for waiting time and over-crowding that currently exists at Gainesville.

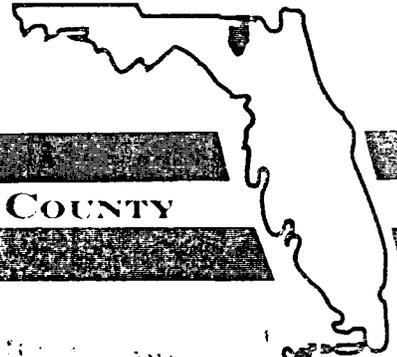
The responsibilities of your Commission to respond to the Draft National Plan are complex and difficult. I applaud your commitment to this country's veterans and the task you have in undertaking the realignment of such a large and complicated health care system.

I thank you for this opportunity and I invite you to visit us. We plan to throw a shindig after this is all over and we'd love to have you join us for some good southern cooking. Commissioner Williams has already promised to dish up his famous barbeque and maybe even some buck in a blanket.

District No. 1 - Ronald Williams
District No. 2 - Dewey Weaver
District No. 3 - George Skinner
District No. 4 - Jennifer Flinn
District No. 5 - James Montgomery

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BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS • COLUMBIA COUNTY

July 15, 2003

Richard Larson
Executive Director
VACO 00CARES
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Mr. Larson:

On behalf of the Save Our VA Task Force in Lake City, Florida, our community leaders, and most importantly the veterans served by the VA Medical Center in Lake City, we thank you for providing the opportunity to meet with the CARES Commission members on July 10, 2003.

The CARES Commissioners were most gracious and listening attentively to the presentation made by the Task Force. We believe the visit and the tour of the facility put names and faces with impersonal numbers that all reinforce our position in maintaining the current levels of service.

As you may have heard, an estimated 400 people from the service area participated in a peaceful demonstration near the VA, showing support of the Lake City VA mission and the 36,000 veterans enrolled for care there.

We are encouraged by all the support we have received from not only local communities but from Washington Congressional members as well.

We are writing to formally request an invitation to the September 10, 2003 hearing in Orlando, Florida, as we must continue to work toward a final, favorable decision that services will not be reduced in Lake City. We understand that time and space is limited, however, if we could receive two time slots to present our information, it would be appreciated. Please contact Mary Kay Hollingsworth at 386-758-1005 to further discuss this possibility.

Again, we appreciate your interest.

With best regards,

Ronald Williams
Board Chairman

BOARD MEETS FIRST THURSDAY AT 7:00 P.M.
AND THIRD THURSDAY AT 7:00 P.M.



UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

October 7, 2003

The Honorable Everett Alvarez, Jr.
Chairman
Veterans Affairs CARES Commission
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Chairman,

I write to welcome you and the members of the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) Commission to Washington and to thank you all for the energy and dedication each of you bring to this process. Additionally, as you continue your deliberations, I wanted to encourage the Commission to consider the expansion of services at the Lake City VA Medical Center in Lake City, Florida.

As a matter of background, the CARES process first touched one of the communities I represent when numerous VA hospital administrators were asked to evaluate the feasibility of consolidating, and in some cases reducing or eliminating, certain services within the hospitals. The Lake City VA Medical Center was among those facilities on the list.

Given the growing population of retired veterans in Northeast Florida and Southeast Georgia, I expressed great concern at the prospect of removing services from the Lake City VA Medical Center and took these concerns directly to the Department of Veterans Affairs. My office made several inquiries to the Department, met with the Undersecretary of Veterans Affairs for Health, Dr. Robert Roswell, and held community meetings to discuss the best way to keep the Lake City VA Medical Center intact.

Mr. Chairman, you and the Commission have a heavy responsibility to conduct an external assessment of VA's capital asset needs and to assure that stakeholder and beneficiary concerns are fully addressed. Your final recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs will help our nation with the realignment and allocation of capital assets necessary to meet the demands for and enhance veterans' health care services over the next 20 years.

The Honorable Everett Alvarez, Jr.
Chairman
Veterans Affairs CARES Commission
October 7, 2003
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When the draft plan was submitted to the Commission in August, I was extremely pleased that it did not include plans for any major downsizing or reducing of services at the Lake City VA Medical Center. Nevertheless, the plan does call for the transfer of current inpatient surgery services to Gainesville. Rather than any shift in services from Lake City, I would encourage the Commission to use this opportunity to assess the potential for expanding services at the Center to meet the needs of Northeast Florida's ever increasing veterans population.

As I stated, your recommendations will impact the allocation of precious resources for enhanced veterans' health care services for the next twenty years and any long-range review of those needs certainly must include the addition of services in a region such as that served by the Lake City facility. As the Commission may remember from its on-site visit, the Lake City VA Medical Center is clearly a top-notch facility.

The Center meets the needs of our veterans providing a high level of care and service they deserve. Today, the facility serves 34 counties in Florida and 19 in Georgia. At last count, the Lake City VA served 159,483 people on an outpatient basis in 2002 and so far this year, that number has been 139,141. The needs of Northeast Florida veterans are clear.

My desire is to provide these veterans and those that will be served by the Center in the future with the very best care and a full range of services. Ensuring that these beneficiary concerns are fully addressed can be resolved by an enhancement and expansion of services at the Lake City VA Medical Center.

Finally, I have attached a statement submitted by the "Save the VA Task Force in Lake City, Florida," for inclusion in today's record. Thank you for the quality work you and the Commission are doing to gather, evaluate, and assess the VA medical facilities serving our veterans population. Please know that my office stands ready and available to you and the Commission should you decide to include this expansion request in your final report. I look forward to receiving the Commission's final work product.

Sincerely,



ANDER CRENSHAW
Member of Congress

Cc: The Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services Commission



United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0905

BILL NELSON
FLORIDA

September 10, 2003

The Honorable Everett Alvarez, Jr.
Chairman
CARES Commission
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW,
Washington, DC 20480

Dear Chairman Alvarez:

I appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to the CARES Commission on the draft national CARES plan and its impact on Florida. Florida has the second largest veterans population in the country; therefore any change in the services provided by the Veterans Administration has an enormous impact on our Florida communities.

I support this process that the VA is using to take a critical look at the current use of infrastructure and staff, while balancing the need to provide veterans with adequate and accessible service. The draft national CARES plan has recognized the needs of an underserved veterans population in Florida. Two problems stand out in particular: veterans in the Panhandle lack access to primary care facilities, inpatient services, and specialty care within an acceptable driving range; and, Orlando is a major metropolitan area without a VA hospital. The CARES plan addresses both these problems, but concerns still remain over whether the VA will be able to implement the proposed solutions for these areas.

I wholeheartedly endorse the placement of a new VA hospital in Orlando. This is a central location that would provide care within an acceptable driving distance to the largest number of veterans. Requiring sick and elderly veterans to travel hundreds of miles for care is simply unacceptable. With my endorsement of the hospital in Orlando, I pledge my full and focused support when the hospital's construction is requested by the Department of Veterans Affairs and approved by Congress' authorization and appropriations processes. I also think that the veteran population in Southwest Florida will demonstrate the need for an additional hospital in the Fort Myers area.

The preliminary analysis behind the draft national CARES plan gave considerable attention to the Lake City VA Medical Center. The services provided by the Lake City facility are absolutely essential to the veterans in that community. I recently visited Lake City and heard about the apprehension felt by these veterans as they faced the potential loss of services. Although there is a VA facility in Gainesville, Lake City provides care to veterans across a large area of North Florida and South Georgia. Adding forty miles to the commute of those veterans, who already travel long distances to Lake City, would be contrary to the purpose of the CARES process. We must preserve the Lake City facility because of the needs of the large number of veterans that it serves.

A large portion of the draft CARES plan focuses on the creation, growth, or enhancement of DOD/VA facilities and services sharing agreements. These sharing agreements are intended to meet the majority of veterans requirements in the Florida Panhandle, which falls under VISN 16, as well as outpatient services at McDill AFB in Tampa and inpatient services at the Jacksonville Naval Hospital, both in VISN 8. DOD/VA sharing agreements allow the VA to more quickly address needs in underserved communities through the use of existing federal medical facilities. Unfortunately, as became apparent at the VISN 16 CARES hearing in Biloxi, Mississippi, there is a lack of direction from the Defense Department as to their commitment to and understanding of sharing agreements. I intend to write a letter to the Defense Department in support of DOD/VA sharing agreements and request an official policy directive or regulation that will explicitly establish the DOD's commitment to and plan to implement these agreements. The draft CARES proposal relies heavily upon these agreements in Florida, and I want to work with the VA, the Commission, and the Department of Defense to ensure that we achieve the objective of adequate health care for our veterans.

The issue that demands the attention of the commission in regards to DOD/VA sharing is any impact that Base Realignment and Closure of military installations outside of Florida would have on Florida's military medical facilities and their ability to provide care to the veterans' community. Priority treatment at a military treatment facility must go to the service personnel at that base. However, we must also bear in mind the capacity of these facilities over time to also provide care to the veterans community. With the closure of Navy training facilities and installations in Puerto Rico, important military operations and exercises will relocate to Florida, potentially increasing the demand on existing military medical facilities. This trend could place pressure on the capabilities of the medical facilities at those installations, making it more difficult for them to meet the needs of veterans.

I support DOD/VA sharing agreements as a logical solution to the lack of medical care facilities for veterans in Florida. We need to ensure that the CARES Commission, the Department of Defense, and the Department of Veterans Affairs address these concerns.

Finally, I want to encourage the commission to continue to revisit the veterans population projections used in the draft national CARES plan. Twenty-year projections may soon be out of date, as our military commitments around the world create a new generation of veterans who will be turning to the VA system for quality health care upon their return to the United States.

I thank you for your consideration of these thoughts and I look forward to working with you in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill Nelson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "B" and "N".