

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF****CAROL RUSSO****PRESIDENT VA EMPLOYEE ASSOCIATION  
VA MEDICAL CENTER, POPLAR BLUFF, MO****FOR SUBMISSION TO THE CARES COMMISSION HEARING****AUGUST 20, 2003**

Commissioners, Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments regarding the CARES Program on behalf of the Poplar Bluff, VA Medical Center Employees' Association.

Thanks to the foresight and leadership of Missouri's favorite son, President Harry S. Truman, the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center opened its doors to veterans in January 1951. Since that time the medical center and its employees have provided quality health care for the veterans of southeast Missouri and Northeast Arkansas. Over those 52 years we have seen the medical center shrink from 176 acute medicine and surgery beds to just the remaining 16. The medical center that once offered major orthopedic, urological,

EENT and general surgery now can offer only lump and bump surgery done on an outpatient basis.

The number of employees caring for veterans at the medical center has gone from more than 400 to 360.

During that same 50 years we sent our young men and women in uniform to foreign lands to fight for you and me. We sent them to Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Grenada, Somalia, Kosovo and now twice to Iraq. Our appetite for war has not gone away but unfortunately our desire to care for those who fight those wars is waning.

The John J. Pershing VA Medical and its 360 employees serve a large rural area. Most of the roads are narrow and winding secondary blacktop roads. It is a long way to anywhere from this part of the heartland. Many of our veterans cannot afford nor have the ability to drive to metropolitan areas like St. Louis and Memphis, which are 3-4 hours from their homes. The introduction of our community based outpatient clinics has further enhanced this medical center's service to our veterans by providing basic services within 50 miles of the veterans' homes. While Poplar Bluff may never be a tertiary care level hospital they need to be able to meet the basic healthcare of veterans including inpatient care. More specialty care must be provided at Poplar Bluff so our 80-year old veterans are not required to drive 4 hours to see an orthopedist or cardiologist.

Our veterans gave their best for their country; our country owes them no less. Now is not the time to reduce our support for veterans... but the time to increase it.