

Network 17 CARES Hearing – Waco
Testimony of Thomas J. Stranova

Thank you for inviting me here today to testify on this important VA initiative. The subject of my testimony today will be the CARES plans for the North and Central Markets in Network 17.

Facilities in the North Market include the Dallas VA Medical Center (VAMC), which is a tertiary care hospital, the Sam Rayburn Veterans Medical Center, an extended care facility that also offers primary and limited specialty care, and the VA staffed Fort Worth Outpatient Clinic, which offers primary and specialty outpatient care. In addition, the VA North Texas Health Care System offers its patients a network of contracted clinics across the market area.

The service delivery requirements in the North Market are straightforward in that no major realignments are necessary. Although straightforward, the service needs are significant and challenging to address because of the tremendous growth in workload projected by CARES.

The CARES process and data for the North Market shows the need for planning initiatives in primary and specialty outpatient services as well as inpatient care.

Demand for primary care in the North market is expected to increase 43% by 2022 over 2001 levels. During the same period, the demand for specialty care is expected to increase by 154%.

The Network 17 CARES plan proposed that six VA staffed CBOCs be activated throughout the Dallas/Ft. Worth Metro Area and that one existing contract CBOC be significantly expanded and converted into a VA staffed clinic. These new clinics would be activated over the next seven years starting in 2005. However, all of these clinics are categorized as a low priority in the draft VHA national CARES plan.

The North Market has capacity planning initiatives for inpatient medicine and psychiatry. It is proposed that these planning initiatives be addressed through new construction at the Dallas VA Medical Center to accommodate increased bed days of care. The Network 17 CARES plan calls for an additional 37 medicine beds and 33 psychiatric beds at the Dallas campus. It is important to note that while we will be adding beds in the North Market, renovation of existing space is also critical in order to be compliant with environment of care standards.

I will now speak to CARES initiatives in the Central Market.

The Central Market currently has facilities that provide inpatient and outpatient services in Temple and Waco, and there are VA staffed outpatient clinics in Austin, Brownwood, Cedar Park, Palestine, College Station and Marlin.

CARES data identified capacity planning initiatives in the Central Market in the areas of primary, specialty and mental health services as well as an access planning initiative for hospital care.

CARES projections for 2022 indicate that a majority of the Veterans that are outside of the primary care access standards in the Central Market, are located in the Austin sub-market. While there is already an outpatient clinic located in southeast Austin, providing primary, specialty, and mental health services, the Network 17 plan recommends an expansion in these outpatient services in the Austin area to meet projected growth.

To meet the inpatient health care needs of veterans in the Austin sub market, the draft national CARES plan calls for approximately 27 medicine beds, 10 surgical beds and 27 psychiatric beds in the Austin sub-market. This can be accomplished by lease, lease-to-own, or new construction. In order to operate nursing units that are sized for optimal efficiency the projected number of beds may vary somewhat during project development.

Subsequent to the submission of our Network 17 CARES plan, the Under Secretary for Health conducted a national review of plans submitted by the Networks. As a result of this review, it was requested that we propose a plan to re-align inpatient and residential care programs currently at Waco to other locations within Central Texas without reducing the current service capacity in the Central Texas market. The review proposes that the inpatient programs currently at Waco be realigned to the Temple campus.

Outpatient programs at Waco would be relocated to a new facility in the Waco area.

This clinic will serve veterans from Waco, Marlin, and other surrounding communities.

Our analysis determined that realigning services from Waco to Temple was feasible, but will require capital projects at the Temple campus.

Additionally, in order for the Under Secretary and the Commission to make an informed recommendation, the Network has commenced a realignment study of the Waco facility as prescribed by the national CARES program office. This study will examine factors such as workload and costs, as well as impacts on access to services, staff and the community at large.

I would like to take a few minutes to address several of the key issues regarding impacts of the proposed Waco realignment on patients, employees and the community.

At its peak, Waco had capacity for nearly 2,000 inpatients. Today, the facility has less than 250 operating beds of which 107 are psychiatry, and the remainder are nursing home care and blind rehab. This transition is a direct result of changing practices in the delivery of psychiatric care, from long-term institutionalization, to successful community reintegration and rehabilitation.

Concerning the impact on patients.

- First, It is estimated that the realignment would take place over a three to five year period, in a manner that minimizes disruption to patients and their families. At present there are about 18,000 patients who receive their care at Waco, of these 94% use outpatient services only, and 6% use inpatient services. Of the inpatients, just 24% are Waco area residents.

- The full array of outpatient mental health services will continue to be provided in the Waco area. These include, general mental health care, intensive case management, day treatment programs, and our homeless program as well as specialized substance abuse and PTSD programs. Those primary and specialty care services currently offered at Waco will be continued as well in the new location. Therefore, there will be no impact on the 94% of patients currently utilizing Waco for outpatient services.

- Additionally, realignment of the inpatient programs to the Temple VAMC will give patients immediate access to emergency, medical, and surgical services, as well as other programs that support patients receiving inpatient mental health care that are not available at the Waco campus.

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There has also been concern expressed about the impact that this proposed realignment will have on employees at the Waco facility.

- No employee will lose their job as a result of the realignment. There are currently 765 employees at the Waco facility; over 200 of these employees will be needed to provide outpatient services in a new outpatient facility located in the Waco area. Thereby, they will continue to provide veterans the same access to high quality care. Those employees providing inpatient services will be offered positions at the Temple VAMC.

I would also like to address potential impacts on the community.

- VA relies on standard federal contracts and purchases few goods and services from the local community, so this will not be an impact.
- Since no employees will lose their employment as a result of this action they will continue to spend their income in their community, and any impact would be minimal.
- The VA will not change its practices of partnering with health care providers in the community.
- The VA currently pays no taxes to the local community. The new clinic, which will be a leased facility, will contribute to the local tax base.

And finally, VA will work closely with community leadership to develop alternative uses for the Waco campus which can have a positive economic impact on the community of Waco.

Regardless of the final outcome of the CARES process I would like to express my high regard for the stakeholders who have so eloquently defended the continuation of a VA presence at the current Waco VA campus.

I want to thank you again for asking me to be here today, and I will now be happy to address any questions that you may have.