

Veterans Deserve the Best

March 7, 2007

America's finest. This term applies to the brave men and women who choose to serve their country. This term must also apply to the hospital systems that provide their medical care.

Veterans and military medical centers have a proud tradition of world-class medical care for members of the Armed Forces. Unfortunately, this reputation received a black-eye with the unsettling and unacceptable realization of substandard facilities, outpatient care, and oversight at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

I am a strong supporter of the Members of this nation's Armed Forces. Our country's heroes earned the right to the best healthcare available. I am appalled at the revelation of inadequate conditions and care at Walter Reed and will tour the facility to speak with the staff and patients about the current conditions and how to improve them.

I am pleased by the swift actions of Defense Secretary Gates, but welcome congressional hearings investigating Walter Reed and this country's Veterans Affairs (VA) and military medical systems. Additionally, I have joined with several other Freshmen Members in sending a letter to President Bush on the situation at Walter Reed. We have also requested a meeting with Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson to discuss his plans to upgrade the veterans' medical system.

I am encouraged by the naming of former Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala and former Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole as the heads of the bipartisan commission, which will conduct a comprehensive review of the care and services provided to our returning wounded service members. Both are honorable individuals, who will approach this task, not as a Democrat or Republican, but as concerned and grateful Americans who believe our soldiers deserve the very best.

As a Member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, I will take an active role in the congressional investigations and crafting solutions that ensure our wounded warriors receive the care and services they deserve. Our hearings, along with the bipartisan commission, will quickly determine if this problem is confined to Walter Reed or systemic.

For our veterans and their families' sake, I hope that the situation at Walter Reed is an isolated incident. In 2007, veterans' medical facilities will handle an estimated 5.8 million users and 64.4 million outpatient visits. Additionally, the system will fill more than 121 million prescriptions for America's veterans.

This is not only a national issue. Here in Florida, the VA spent more than \$5 billion in 2005 to care for nearly 1.8 million veterans who live in the state.

These small samplings of statistics on the VA's impact on the lives of not only our veterans, but their families, underscore the moral obligation incumbent upon us to resolve this problem.

It is not enough just correcting conditions at Walter Reed. Overseeing progress toward a seamless transition to veteran status is a top priority for the Veterans' Affairs Committee. As a Member of this Committee, which has begun oversight hearings, I will review processes for determining eligibility for veterans' benefits, assessing health status, and ensuring that receiving VA healthcare once a service member separates from active duty is seamless, timely and accurate. Rest assured I will work tirelessly to improve the health care and benefits services provided to our nation's veterans.

I have toured local VA medical facilities, and recently met with staff and patients at the VA Outpatient Clinic in Pasco County. Additionally, I will again tour James A. Haley and Bay Pines VA Medical Centers in Tampa and St. Petersburg. Haley Medical Center is one of the largest VA hospitals in the country and only one of four that offers a poly-trauma center. It plays an essential role in providing the necessary medical services to this country's wounded heroes - especially those in the Tampa area. During the visit, I will meet with patients and staff to see what I can do as one of their local Members of Congress and as a Member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

I encourage all Members of Congress to tour local VA and military medical facilities, not to investigate, but to meet with the patients, their families, staff and administrators to discover how Congress can help them continue the tradition of wonderful services they have a history of providing to our nation's soldiers.

Congress must address this issue head on and determine the root of the problem. This is America's problem, and we must come together as a Congress, and as a government, to ensure our Armed Forces Members, America's finest, receive America's finest medical care.

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