

NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION COMMISSION

TOPIC 1: The Department of Veterans Affairs Inspector General's (IG) Office Reports The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Falsely Reported Wait Times For Veterans.

BACKGROUND: As reported by the Associated Press on September 11, 2007, The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) repeatedly understated wait times for injured veterans seeking medical care and in many serious cases forced them to wait more than 30 days, counter to department policy, an internal investigation shows. The review by the VA inspector general's office, released Monday, examined 700 outpatient appointments for primary and specialty care scheduled in October 2006 at 10 VA medical centers. It found that the VHA in recent months falsely reported to Congress that nearly all of its appointments - about 95 percent - were scheduled within 30 days of a patient's requested date. In fact, only three in four veterans - 75 percent - received such timely appointments. In addition, despite warnings by the IG in 2005 to more accurately report wait times, department officials last year also may have understated the number of veterans on their electronic waiting lists by more than 53,000. According to the report, "While waiting time inaccuracies and omissions from electronic waiting lists can be caused by a lack of training and data entry errors, we also found that schedulers at some facilities were interpreting the guidance from their managers to reduce waiting times as instruction to never put patients on the electronic waiting list," VA investigators wrote. "This seems to have resulted in some 'gaming' of the scheduling process," Responding, VA undersecretary for health Michael Kussman partly agreed that the agency should take additional steps to improve scheduling with better training, procedures and better accounting of records. But he insisted the VA in most cases was doing the best it can and challenged the IG report's methodology, citing patient satisfaction surveys showing roughly 85 percent of veterans getting appointments when they needed them. In April, Kussman testified to Congress that 95 percent of veterans were receiving the timely appointments. The VA's 2006 annual report, issued last November, makes similar claims.

POSITION: The American Legion consistently advocates that Congress fund VA adequately to ensure veterans get the best care possible in a timely fashion. Once again we call on Congress to provide mandatory funding for veterans health care to ensure that veterans are given the best care possible and do not have to go begging to Congress year after year for money. VA's less than truthful assessment of wait times are an embarrassment to them and to those who have supported them. The American Legion commends VAOIG for its timely and accurate report. **ACTION:** The American Legion will ask Congress, once again, to provide mandatory funding for veterans health care in the hopes that "cooking the books" will no longer be a temptation to those who need to project an image of VA as something more than what it is due to lack of resources.

TOPIC 2: Senator Richard Burr Chosen to Lead Republicans on Veterans' Affairs Committee.

BACKGROUND: Republican members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs today announced they have chosen Senator Richard Burr (R-North Carolina) as the temporary ranking member of the committee. Burr will temporarily replace Senator Larry Craig (R-Idaho). The North Carolina Republican has placed special focus this year

on improving life for the nation's estimated 200,000 homeless veterans. In June his Services to Prevent Veterans Homelessness Act of 2007 (S. 874), was approved by the Committee on Veterans' Affairs as part of the Veterans Traumatic Brain Injury and Programs Improvement Act of 2007 (S. 1233). Burr's legislation will increase veterans' access to assistance for housing, physical and mental health services, health insurance, as well as vocational and financial counseling. Burr is also active on veterans' health issues. A health care policymaker for over a decade, Burr has most recently been vocal on traumatic brain injury, Department of Defense and VA sharing of electronic medical records and the efficiency of the VA health system, especially for veterans in rural areas. Burr has served on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs since he was sworn in as a U.S. Senator on January 3, 2005. He was first elected to the U.S. House Representatives in 1994 and served five terms before he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2004. In addition to his new leadership position on the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Burr serves on the Senate Intelligence Committee; the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee; the Energy and Natural Resources Committee; and the Indian Affairs Committee. **POSITION:** The American Legion supports the decision to replace Sen. Craig with Senator Burr. **ACTION:** The American Legion looks forward to working with the new Ranking Member in crafting policies and legislation in the best interest of our nation's veterans.

TOPIC 3: New Polytrauma Facility to be Built on the Audie Murphy Veterans Memorial Hospital Campus in San Antonio, TX.

BACKGROUND: According to the *Houston Chronicle*, San Antonio has been selected as the site of a \$67 million rehabilitation center to treat veterans and troops returning from Iraq with multiple wounds. The new "polytrauma" facility will be built on the Audie Murphy Veterans Memorial Hospital campus. This is one of five sites nationwide. The VA operates other sites in Richmond, VA; Tampa, FL.; Minneapolis, MN; and Palo Alto, CA. The facility will be of greatest benefit to those with traumatic brain injuries, known as the signature wound of GWOT because of the widespread use of explosives. Construction on the center is expected to begin in fiscal 2008, which begins Oct. 1, 2007. **POSITION:** The American Legion supports the decision to build the new Polytrauma facility. However, The American Legion still advocates for the full funding of CARES. While Congress has seen fit to increase the amount of money being spent CARES, it is still short of the \$1 billion per year required to fulfill the strategic plan outlined in CARES. **ACTION:** The American Legion will continue to fight for the full funding of CARES.

TOPIC 4: The American Legion holds 89th Annual National Convention in Reno, Nevada. VA&R considers 55 resolutions.

BACKGROUND: On August 26-30, 2007, The American Legion held its 89th Annual National Convention in Reno, Nevada. **ACTION:** Delegates chose Martin F. (Marty) Conatser to lead the 2.7 million-member organization of wartime veterans for a one-year term. 55 Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation resolutions were presented for

consideration. The Convention Committee took the following action on the resolutions:

Approved or Approved w/Amendment	3
Consolidated with Resolutions Approved	0
Referred to the Standing Commission	9
Received and Recorded	27
Rejected	16

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