

Mr. Jack Hetrick, Director of the Hines VA Hospital

Statement of
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Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today regarding your question, "Is the VA Prepared to meet the Needs of Our Returning Vets." I can address this question as relates to the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital.

The Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital is located 12 miles west of downtown Chicago and offers primary, extended and specialty care and serves as a tertiary care referral center for a network of VA hospitals in the area. Hines represents virtually the entire spectrum of VA healthcare and clinical programs. Specialized clinical programs include Blind Rehabilitation, Spinal Cord Injury, Neurosurgery, Radiation Therapy and Cardiovascular Surgery. The hospital also serves as the area's hub for pathology, radiology, radiation therapy, human resource management and fiscal services. Hines currently operates 472 beds and seven community based outpatient clinics (CBOC) in Oak Park, Manteno, Elgin, Oak Lawn, Aurora, LaSalle, and Joliet. Nearly 512,000 patient visits occurred in fiscal year 2004, providing care to 52,647 veterans, primarily from Cook, DuPage and Will counties. So far this year, we have provided care to 6 percent more veterans than we did last year at this time.

Hines offers the full spectrum of mental health services, including inpatient and outpatient psychiatric care, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Program, and a Homeless Chronically Mentally Ill Program, which outreaches to homeless veterans in the Chicago area. Hines provides mental health services at all of its seven CBOCs.

Through initiatives such as Advanced Clinical Access (ACA), Hines is committed to providing timely and accessible care to our veterans. All priority veterans who request a primary care visit and are new enrollees are being scheduled for an evaluation by a primary care provider within 30 days of the veteran's requested date. Hines providers support the VBA process by providing timely compensation and pension (C&P) examinations by consistently staying within the VHA time standard of 35 days. To make certain we never take for granted our current veterans and returning veterans, I recently established an awareness program entitled "It's All About the Vet at the Hines VA" that was designed to reconnect each employee at Hines with our mission to care for veterans. Hospital staff and veteran volunteers served as instructors for the

class. At the end of the program each employee was challenged to write down how they individually contribute to our mission.

Hines is committed to ensuring a smooth transition from 000 healthcare to VA healthcare for Chicago-area soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. As part of VA's seamless transition process, Hines has increased the number of outreach activities to returning service members and new veterans, including Reserve and National Guard units. In Fiscal Year 2004, Hines saw 308 OIF/OEF patients and we expect to exceed this number this year as we have already treated 290 of these patients through the first 9 months of this fiscal year. Hines has a special office set up to coordinate activities locally and to assure that the health care needs of the newest veterans are fully met. Hines has made a commitment to assure that returning OIF/OEF veterans have full and timely access to mental health care. We are able to schedule returning Iraqi veterans for a mental health evaluation immediately upon request and have established a special support group specifically for veterans returning from Iraq with post traumatic stress disorder issues.

Many service members are returning from combat with severe injuries, requiring extensive hospitalization and rehabilitation. Since Hines offers specialized services not provided by 000 in this region of the country, we have received a number of active duty soldiers for spinal cord rehabilitation and blind orientation and mobility. Presently in the Hines Blind Rehabilitation program, a young OEF/OIF active duty soldier that was blinded in combat is undergoing intense rehabilitation. When I met this soldier he told me how committed he was to learn how to deal with his condition. He went on to say that he researched Blind Rehab programs available around the country and determined that Hines was the best and that is where he wanted to go. In our Spinal Cord Injury program we recently received another active duty service member injured stateside. His home is outside the Chicago area and his wife accompanied him to be with him during this critical period. Knowing their home was outside the Chicago area; our Social Work staff offered assistance in finding a place for her to stay and continues to follow-up to assure her we will help in anyway possible. The importance of these two programs was spotlighted this past May 20th when Secretary Nicholson was on hand to dedicate two new state of the art buildings that serve our Blind Rehabilitation and Spinal Cord Injury programs. These two new facilities will allow us to continue the fine tradition of high quality care for these two special needs programs.

Hines is fully accredited by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), as well as National Committee for Quality

Assurance (NCQA), and the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF).

VHA's performance measurement system enables us to hold ourselves accountable for providing high quality of care for veterans. Hines meets or exceeds the private sector benchmarks in industry recognized performance measures in the care of heart attacks, heart failure and pneumonia. Hines has been recognized as a leader in patient safety and has been identified for best

practices in JCAHO publications and the Annual Patient Safety Forum. For example, the Hines patient safety program was recognized in the May 2004 JCAHO publication "Patient Safety" and in the November 2004 JCAHO publication "Source".

The Secretary of Veterans Affairs has approved and signed an enhanced use agreement allowing Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago to renovate and establish a transitional living center and a low-income senior living center that will occupy two previously unused buildings on the Hines campus. These two "Faith Based" initiatives will serve veterans without added cost to the hospital and will renovate unused buildings without utilizing limited capital resources.

In summary, the staff at the Hines VA Hospital works extremely hard to provide top quality health care to all our veterans. Our patient satisfaction scores are a direct reflection of this commitment and hard work. Over the past three years our inpatient satisfaction scores have consistently been on the rise, with the majority of our patients rating their overall care as "Excellent" or "Very Good." In the first half of this year, we have served over 47,000 veterans as outpatients and during the first quarter of Fiscal Year 05 our overall outpatient satisfaction score was in the top ten scores nationwide. We are proud of the first-rate healthcare we provide to America's veterans, and are fully committed to meeting this challenge in the future. I believe the Hines VA Hospital has demonstrated and can promise that we are prepared to meet the needs of returning vets.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This concludes my formal remarks. I welcome any questions the Committee Members may have.