

James W Stanko, American Legion District 14 Commander, Steamboat Springs

10 August 2005

Honorable Senator Ken Salazar  
702 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Salazar,

Thank you for allowing me to present testimony on veterans' health care. I would like to take this opportunity to address some issues which are of importance to veterans of Northwest Colorado and through out all rural areas of Colorado.

Health care is becoming a national issue with the cost of insurance becoming a financial burden to many families. Employers are looking to cut benefits as a way to reduce costs and many veterans, especially those in their late 50's and early 60's, are getting caught up in this loss of benefits; therefore, they are turning to the VA as a means of having some form of health insurance. This is putting a strain on the Veterans' Administration.

This is a problem that will not go away. There is a steady growth of men and women who have served their country reaching an age where they will be looking to the VA for health care. We also have those that are currently serving; these service members will be coming into the system in just a few years. The VA health care system needs some serious overhauling in order to accommodate these future veterans. The time to start this is now and one of the places we can start is here in Northwest Colorado.

Northwest Colorado is one of the few areas of the State that Veterans have to drive more than 180 miles to reach a VA health care facility. Because we are in a very mountainous area, a trip to a VA facility can become a dangerous adventure. Weather conditions and dodging game animals on the road is something our older World War II and Korean War veterans should not have to do. Many of the Viet Nam era veterans are also in or approaching their sixties and driving for them can also be difficult.

The solution that American Legion members of our Post, along with members of other Posts in the District, would like to suggest is to establish VA health care contracts with local medical facilities for basic healthcare. A contract with local medical facilities would accomplish several things. First, it allows veterans to get basic healthcare in a facility they are familiar with and with medical personnel they know, trust, and are comfortable with all without the stress of travel. Second, this allows tax-payer dollars to remain local. Third, it would generate more patient activity for the local hospital which would help with hospital income. This solution would save resources, the local hospital's already exist; no new facilities would need to be built, equipped, and staffed. This would save the Veterans' Administration financial resources. Veterans' would be working with healthcare givers who are already familiar with their medical history, thus saving time resources (no review of medical history needed), medical testing (the local doctor knows which tests have been done, thus, no duplication of testing), and with minimal traveling,

the veteran would save serious money on fuel costs. It is a solution which will help at both the local, state, and national levels.

Two American Legion members of our Post, Gar Williams, a Department of Colorado Jr. Vice Commander, and Mike Condie, the County Veterans Affairs Officer, have been working hard on getting local medical facilities to come on board with this idea. To this end, I am able to present a letter from the Yampa Valley Medical Center in Steamboat Springs and a Resolution from the Kremmling Memorial Hospital District affirming that they would be willing to work with the VA to provide services to veterans. The Craig Memorial Hospital has also indicated they would work with the VA. These documents show that there is a willingness of the medical facilities in Northwest Colorado to work with the VA to come up with a contract that would benefit Veterans at the local level.

This contract system would not only benefit Northwest Colorado, but would also help rural communities in the other three remote corners of the State. Contracting for health care is not a new idea for the VA. In fact it already happens in many rural areas in other States. As an example, in Western Nebraska, the VA employs practicing nurses to visit and care for veterans.

Another alternative is to actually get a Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Northwest Colorado. Steamboat Springs has been suggested as the site for this clinic because it is central to all Counties involved. However, as I have pointed out, this is a duplication of services. A CBOC would have to contract space, and equipment, mostly likely from the local hospital. Also the Visiting Nurses of Northwest Colorado are trying to get a clinic for the care of seniors and the community of Oak Creek is trying to find a way to fund their clinic, so why another clinic? Money used to fund a clinic that duplicates services could be better used to contract services for veterans. But if a CBOC is the only alternative the VA has to offer the Veterans of Northwest Colorado, then we'll take it.

I would also like to take this opportunity to support your bill, The VetsRide Act S.1191. This is a very positive step in helping veterans in rural areas. As a veteran's organization we are very pleased with the amendment on Community-Based Outpatient Clinics. Also, if Northwest Colorado does not end up with health care contracts or a CBOC, the transportation grants would be a tremendous asset in solving the funding problems we have in getting veterans to a VA hospital.

I would like to encourage Senator Salazar to join with the American Legion position in supporting mandatory funding for the VA, especially VA healthcare. This is the real solution to the health care funding problem. Even though the current Administration claims an increase in VA funding, this funding is woefully inadequate. Men and women that have served or are currently serving deserve and have earned the right to reasonable health care and our Government needs to accept this responsibility and step forward with mandatory funding.

I, along with many veterans that did not serve in a combat zone or situation are very concerned with the Administration's position to create a "core constituency" will place undue financial burdens on the class 7 and 8 veterans. Every person that has put on a

military uniform has made a sacrifice. They have left their homes, loved ones and friends to defend in some way their country and the liberties and freedoms of all Americans; and now a majority is being told they are not really veterans. The Veterans Committee needs to be made aware of the fact that it takes 10 to 12 or even more military personnel to support each combat soldier. When you put on a military uniform you become part of the United States Military and your job is to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution and it doesn't make any difference if you're a clerk, cook or rifleman.. There should be no difference in classification when it comes to obtaining health care. Just as a side note, President George Bush would not be eligible for VA health care if a "core constituency" is set up. I would encourage Senator Salazar as a member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs to fight and stop this slap in the face of all those Veterans who have helped preserve the safety and freedoms of this country from non-combat place or at a non-combat time.

Finally, I would like to suggest an idea that might solve some of the VA health care funding. Could the VA set up some sort of VA health care insurance plan? The plan could include low minimum premium paid by any veteran that signed up. The insurance would only be for the veteran, but it would allow the veteran to be treated at any medical facility. The insurance funding pool would come from the premiums, money from the VA, and veterans Medicaid and Medicare benefits could also be added to the pool. This way any veteran that signed up and paid premiums would be covered at any medical facility with that facility receiving payment from only one entity, the VA insurance.

Again thank you for the opportunity to express my views on the VA health care system. Hopefully these suggestions will help you in your efforts to make health care better and available to all veterans in the State of Colorado.

Signed:  
Jim Stanko  
American Legion Member  
American Legion District 14 Commander