

ARE WE DOING ENOUGH FOR VETERANS HEALTH CARE?

BY ANNA MYERS

The clinical staffing and funding for the Veterans Administration medical system in America are in flux, leaving the veterans in this country without adequate health-care. The possible closures of VA health-care centers across the nation are compounding this problem as are many outside social factors. America has a tradition of aiding our veterans and must find ways to continue to offer support.

Funding has increased each year but the increase in the veterans' population as well as the ages of those veterans are putting more demand on a system already stressed to its limits. Michael Carlson, Assistant Director of the VA Medical Center in Portland confirmed this by explaining that the peak of veterans in the system won't be reached until 2012 and these veterans will be older and much more in need.

All veterans hospitals (like most civilian hospitals) are understaffed and all are underfunded. In my observation, volunteer staff at the Portland Veterans Hospital has increased dramatically in the last three years to fill increased needs the overloaded paid staff is unable to handle. According to an article titled "A System Worth Saving" in *American Legion Magazine* (May, 2003), "In 1995 (the Cheyenne, Wyoming VA Hospital) treated 6,000 patients with a staff of 385. Today this staff has been cut to 340, while the patient load has soared to 13,000." This was a picture repeated all over the country.

Many social factors have also contributed to the increased load on the VA, such as increased unemployment and lower wages, and fewer employer sponsored health-care programs have caused many veterans to now seek health-care through the VA. Michael Carlson confirmed this in our interview. He pointed out that our region has one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country, which has, of course, sent many vets to the VA hospital when they previously had health-care elsewhere. In the last year, he stated, primary-care patient load increased by 29% and overall demand for services increased by 14%. Still, funding across the board has only increased by 7%.



GREGORY L. ABBOTT

Join the people
who've joined the Army.

POSSIBLE CLOSURE OF FACILITIES

Many of the Veterans Hospitals are facing the possibility of closing their doors. The one that affects the local veteran population most is the possible closure of the VA Hospital and extended care facility in Vancouver, Washington. If Vancouver VA Hospital closes its doors, some of the vets feel they will have no other care options for a variety of reasons, including transportation issues, ability to pay for outside services and shortage of staff at the Portland VA Hospital, to name just a few concerns. The VA is attempting to address these issues.

How are these choices to close facilities being made? The choices are being made through a new program called CARES — Capital Asset Enhanced Services. This program is evaluating what building (and services inside) is needed for veterans. The process is looking at where veterans' populations are today and where they will be in the next 20 years. It was designed to close buildings that are no longer in use or that are no longer safe, and open centers where they are most needed.

According to Michael J. Carlson they are looking at many options including contracting services, but many of these systems are already overloaded. He stated that CARES should not cause any decrease in the level of services — it would just move them or provide for them in a different way.

When asked what would happen to the people in the VA nursing home in Vancouver, he explained that the care in the nursing home is more rehabilitation care than long-term care. He said there aren't a lot of outside places that provide this kind and the patients would be contracted out, remain in the hospital or move back to the Portland center.

On September 26, the CARES Commission visited Vancouver to hear testimony from citizens, Congressmen, Senators, veterans groups and doctors. It was clear that this region of the country needs more services, not less. Now the question that remains is whether the Bush administration will listen or care about the information offered.

ARE THERE SOLUTIONS?

According to Ronald F. Conley, National Commander of the American Legion who wrote the article for the Legion magazine, "A System Worth Saving," the following ideas may work to correct many of the issues:

~Pass legislation to make VA health-care funding mandatory rather than discretionary. Taking the politics out of the VA health-care budget would be a monumental step in the right direction. Veterans should not have to beg for money, competing alongside political-action committees, lobbyists and big business in order to see a doctor in a timely fashion. Mandatory VA health-care funding legislation introduced both in the 107th and 108th Congress would serve the purpose if passed.

~Make VA a Medicare provider. Permit VA to bill and receive reimbursements from Medicare for services provided to qualified, Medicare-eligible veterans. Require active involvement and participation with veteran stakeholders on any and all matters relating to the future of VA services or benefits, including facilities realignment. There is a big difference between being briefed and being involved. The veterans' role cannot be that of a silent partner. They are the voice of service for their fellow veterans.

~Restore VA enrollment for Category-8 veterans, the highest income bracket. They are most capable of generating revenue from third-party insurance carriers. Cutting them out severs a revenue stream.

~Put VA health-care back under one umbrella. If that means collapsing the 21 networks (VISNs) nationwide that govern regional VA health-care facilities, so be it. Competition among the VISNs for budget dollars and grants alike has led to regional disparities of care. Quality care in a timely manner can and must be provided fairly across the system.

In conclusion, we must ask does the problem lie with the government or within the Veterans Administration itself? The problem lies in the government which isn't supporting the very people it asked to fight for their country. There are also problems in the system itself. The VA needs to continue to look at new horizons for veterans care and funding. (For example, the Portland VA has a partnership with Oregon Health Services University that helps ease the shortage of staff and aid with research moneys.) But the most important issue is to always take care of the veterans. These are the people who deserve our respect, thanks and support.

Anna Myers is a 2003 graduate of Astoria High School. Her father was a Vietnam veteran who died from exposure to Agent Orange when Anna was 18 months old. She incurred disabilities from his exposure and has spent years fighting for "Helpless Child" benefits from the VA, which she says is "a bungled system because it is controlled by our own government that seems to be in contradiction to helping vets and their families." She is writing a book, *An Outsider's View of Vietnam Vets*, and is interested in interviewing veterans: (503) 325-9342, or e-mail: tigger84@earthlink.net. Her article "DAD" appeared in the Aug/tember 2003 issue of the NCTE.

Gregory L. Abbott's drawing is from *Demilitarized Zones: Veterans After Vietnam* published by First Casualty Press (Vietnam Veterans Against the War) in 1976.

AWAY ALL BOARDERS

BY MICHAEL McCUSKER

American fishermen grumbled for a very long time about the 200 mile protective zone around the shores of the world's oceans. Some bitched because the United States refused until late to support such a zone, and others were displeased that nations had done so.

Many fishermen thought the situation desperate enough to risk war. California fishermen often demanded the U.S. send gunboats to South America to protect the U.S. tuna fleet from seizure by the Peruvian and Ecuadorian navies. Northwestern fishermen had the problem in reverse, and in the early 1970s many of them wanted the government to take action to prevent Russian and Japanese fleets from fishing off our coasts.

One group of Oregon fishermen was desperate enough to think about taking matters into their own hands. They formed an association which they claimed had the support of Governor Tom McCall and Congressmen Wendall Wyatt, and suggested that Washington Senator 'Scoop' Jackson was also interested in their proposal, which they said was to train Vietnam veterans in the mysteries of marine technology.

The plan was to set up a program instructing vets in how to handle boats, from engineering to navigation, and it was hoped that both the state and federal governments would help finance it. The fishermen said they planned to purchase several ocean craft for the program. It was a good opportunity for vets who were having problems finding work, they said.

I was a counselor at the time for a veterans' service agency in Portland known as Project Return (I was USMC in Vietnam) when this group of fishermen, most of them salmon trollers and gillnetters, came in with their idea for employing Vietnam vets.

Those of us at Project Return were a little suspicious. All sorts of fly-by-night outfits had tried to make suckers out of vets desperate for work. They came in every day and we began to know the smell of a fishy deal when it was presented.

And because I had fished the Pacific as a tuna puller I was aware of some of the problems facing the fishing industry. Most had to do with dwindling catches and prices, caused to a large degree by increasing numbers of foreign fishing vessels off the West Coast. A problem the industry did not have was manpower, which seemed to be what this group was suggesting. I also knew that many salmon fishermen in particular were especially vehement about the foreign fleets clustered just off the coast like a World War 2 invasion fleet which essentially acted like a giant net for shore swarming salmon.

It wasn't difficult to suspect this group of fishermen hadn't told us the full story. "Why do you want vets?" we asked.

The group tried ducking the question, but we would discuss nothing further until it was answered. Finally they asked if they could talk privately among themselves. Several minutes later two of us were asked back into the room.

"Would you promise that anything we say won't leave this room?" one asked. My friend and I promised, but told them it was not an agreement to cooperate.

The fishermen looked at each other nervously for a few moments, then the oldest of them spoke. "We need veterans because they're the only ones who can do what we think has to

be done to wake up the government," he said. "The Russians and Japanese are destroying our fish. The state and federal government refuse to do anything about it. For the past few years we have demanded and begged they do something. We've tried to get the boundaries pushed out or at least begged the Coast Guard be used to keep the foreign fleets off our coast. They've done nothing so we decided to do something ourselves. We've scouted the coast for fast boats we could buy and use for patrol — but not just for patrol! We want to board the Russian and Japanese trawlers if they don't take our warnings! It's the only way we can force the government into doing something to save Oregon's fishing industry."

"In other words," I said quietly, "you want an armed force of combat experienced veterans to board and capture foreign ships on the high seas. That's piracy! And do you really think the crews of those ships are going to let them board without a fight?"

"Look, you've got to understand," another fisherman said. "It would only be an example. If we captured only one of them, it might teach them a lesson."

"That hasn't worked with American tuna boats off South America," my friend, whose name was Jim Josey, said. "And it's the governments of those countries taking the boats in tow, not a bunch of vigilantes."

"That's the point," the older fisherman shot back. "We've got to force the government to do the same thing to the damned Russians and Japanese."

I asked if McCall, Wyatt or Jackson were aware of this incidental part of their veterans training program — or if they had even questioned its intent. They said no.

"What the hell do you think we are, Rent-A-Mercenary?" Josie, who had been an Army 'grunt' in Vietnam, exploded. He told them the vets we worked with already had enough problems without getting shot at again, and worse, becoming pirates as well. "You want to use these guys, just like they were used before," he said angrily. "If you want to play Captain Kidd, just you go right ahead — but count us out, brother."

They left and we never heard from them again. I knew they were desperate and while fishing again later that year for albacore, before the boat I was aboard went down and I ended up on another troller off California, I nosed around the Astoria and Warrenton waterfronts whenever I was ashore to see if anything ever came of their plan. Apparently nothing did. Most other fishermen I talked with were angry and agreed something must be done about the Russians and Japanese — some even claimed they felt like ramming the big trawlers with their boats or sniping with rifles at crewmen on their decks, but if they ever did, I never heard about that either.

Most of them said they hadn't heard of any plans of turning armed veterans loose and doubted that was the answer. "When I come home with an empty hold I get mad, and I think it would be worth going to war with Russia or Japan just to be able to sink one of those bastards," a fisherman said. "But when I think about it, I get scared I ever thought about it."

*Jim Josey committed suicide on Thanksgiving Day 1978. He said once, "When you're in a war, you're already dead."



OPEN YOUR MIND
Mental Illnesses Are Brain Disorders

NAMI CLATSOP COUNTY
373 ALTADENA, ASTORIA + 325-3733
An affiliate of National Alliance for the
Mentally Ill and of NAMI, Oregon