

OPINION

editor@dailyastorian.com



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Caring for vets should be national duty

Tales of long waits and poor access to proper care have plagued the VA

In advance of this year's Veterans Day, on Nov. 11, the legions of men and women who have served in our nation's military received some welcoming news: Congress finally agreed to fund the VA Mission Act, which since its June passage had been mired in budgetary disputes.



CHRISTOPHER DALE

Announced on Sept. 11 — an appropriate date — the arrangement sets aside more than \$200 billion to improve the health care services provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Tales of delays and deficiencies, including long waits and poor access to proper care, have plagued the VA since injured vets started returning from Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11. Last fall — 16 years after the War on Terror began — the VA was still flooded with serious complaints about patient care; earlier this year, concerns about doctor shortages made headlines.

It's these issues that the VA Mission Act seeks to address. The law makes it easier for veterans to access covered care through non-VA service providers, who may be more convenient in terms of expedience, distance or quality of care.

The law's primary principle is simple: Those injured while serving in the military should not need to jump through hoops for quality medical care.

The law also provides incentives for recruiting new doctors to the VA, including an attractive education debt-relief initiative and specialized training in afflictions most likely to impact veterans, such as PTSD and painkiller addiction.

It's a terrific start, but the law has shortcomings. For starters, despite settling the summer-long financial squabble, Congress failed to deliver a long-term funding solution for the law's historically high (though completely necessary) revenue requirements.

But the law's greatest disappointment is



AP Photo/Don Ryan

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Portland.

its narrowly defined view of caring for our injured veterans.

Tens of thousands of men and women have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan with permanent physical handicaps and deep emotional scars — wounds they will be coping with for the rest of their lives. Many need assistance outside the doctor's office, including finding suitable employment in an economy that, though humming for many, is far from ideal for individuals with disabilities, whose unemployment rate is more than double the national average.

Truly comprehensive care would not only fix the VA but expand it to empower injured veterans with economic opportunities, peer-to-peer engagement, and group-centric mental health programs that utilize injured veterans'

greatest tool for overcoming battle-born trauma: each other.

Of course, nonprofit organizations like the Wounded Warrior Project have been offering these life-affirming tools for well over a decade. But why should it be up to private charities to take care of those who battled and bled for their country?

In a political landscape where we can't seem to agree on anything, it's likely that anyone — Democrat or Republican — would be challenged to find a single service provided by charities like the Wounded Warrior Project that doesn't deserve the full financial backing of the U.S. government.

We shouldn't have to pull on the heartstrings, and purse strings, of strangers to care for wounded war veterans in the United

States. Their care should be provided, in full, by the American people.

The VA Mission Act is a step in the right direction, but we can — and should — go further by expanding the definition of what caring for injured veterans means. Our wounded veterans deserve not only exemplary health care, but all the tools they need to re-assimilate into civilian life despite missing limbs or shattered psyches. And to provide them what they are so obviously owed, the wealthiest country in the world should be relying on funding, not fundraising.

Christopher Dale of Little Falls, New Jersey, writes on society, politics and sobriety-based issues. This column was written for the Progressive Media Project, which is run by The Progressive magazine.

Water under the bridge



Compiled by Bob Duke

From the pages of Astoria's daily newspapers

10 years ago this week — 2008

Barack Obama is vowing to be a president for all of America, even those who voted against him.

On the North Coast, Obama and John McCain supporters had emotional reactions to the presidential election results. Clatsop County Democrats expressed relief and joy at Obama's victory, while Republicans were full of worry and fear.

Obama cast his election as a defining moment in American history and an answer to cynicism and doubt about the power of democracy.

Juvenile chinook salmon swimming down the Columbia River often turn a corner at Clifton Channel, about 20 miles upriver from Astoria, and enter the marshy backwaters that meander through a cluster of islands, between Bradwood landing and Svensen.

There, they find a slower current, lots of critters to eat and refuge from predators.

It's a great place for salmon fry to bulk up for their journey into the ocean, said fish biologist Curtis Roegner of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. And research shows about 15 percent of all the out-migrating salmon in the river choose that back-channel route.

But to get there, the fish have to swim past Bradwood landing, where NorthernStar Natural Gas Inc. of Houston has proposed to build a \$650 million liquefied natural gas facility.

Astoria and the North Coast are notable for having two seasons — a cold, dark, rainy season and a mild, rainy season. The hillsides of the Coast Range, covered with evergreens, provide few signs of change. But before bundling up for the gray days of winter and the dark drives home, to and from work, evidence of fall can be found if you look hard enough.

50 years ago — 1968

Zion Lutheran church, oldest Finnish church west of the Rockies, celebrated its 85th anniversary Sunday, Nov. 3.



2008 — Shielding herself from the rain, Joanne Webb walks through a corridor of colored leaves lining Exchange Street near the Astoria Aquatics Center.

The church was founded Aug. 22, 1883 as Finnish Evangelical church. Present name was adopted Aug. 1, 1942.

County Health Officer Dr. Noel Rawls told the County Welfare Commission an influx of elderly patients from the State Mental hospital in Salem to the new Seaside Convalescent Center will hike the county welfare budget by \$5,340 a year.

An estimated 3,000 people saw the annual Lions Home and Auto show the past three days at Tongue Point, which Lions officials considered an excellent turnout considering the facts that the show was held in the fall rather than the spring for the first time, and was held at a new location in hanger 3 at the Job Corps center.

Republican Richard M. Nixon was elected 37th president of the United States and won an immediate pledge of support from Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey, the man he narrowly defeated.

Oregonians have voted down a \$40 million proposal to preserve the ocean beaches for the public, but its sponsors say the battle is not over.

"We must turn to the Legislature next session," said state treasurer Robert Straub, chief backer of the measure.

Gov. Tom McCall said he would support the move to get the Legislature to take whatever steps are necessary to save the beaches, but expressed fear the Legislature might be reluctant to act now that the people have voted against the measure to buy whatever stretches of beach prove not to be in public ownership already.

With the general election commotion subsiding, county officials began an official canvass of votes cast in Clatsop County, where the voter turnout was around 90 percent.

75 years ago — 1943

Brightly lighted streets, with gay store fronts, neon signs, theater marques, and lights streaming from all windows, did not seem to be the prospect for Astoria's first night after the lifting of the dimout.

The governor, with orders from the western defense command, has revoked all previous proclamations, and unlimited lighting is now permitted, with but one restriction: that all lights be extinguishable within 60 seconds for total blackout.

The aluminum industry in the Pacific Northwest is one of the big reasons why the allies are winning the war — and why the postwar world will have the advantage of the light metal for better living.

The full force of "Astoria's navy," including depth bombs, deck guns and finally 500-pound aerial bombs, was poured on the capsized hulk of a Longview Bridge and Construction company derrick off the Columbia River recently, to remove it as a menace to navigation.

That a severe shortage of tires for both pleasure and essential driving is an actual fact was impressed upon a group of local tire inspectors, taxi owners and drivers, and ration board members late last week when they met with Waldo Perry of the U.S. Tire store and J.H. Hedrick, head of the tire division of the state OPA in Portland.

Perry, who had just returned from a conference of the National Association of Independent Tire Dealers, said that tires must be recapped as many times as the casings will permit and that driving just be held down to essential. He quoted one of the conference speakers, Sparks Bonnett, chief of the OPA tire rationing branch, as saying that "tires on civilian cars are wearing down at a rate eight times faster than they are being replaced ... if this continues, by far the larger number of cars will be off the road next year."