

Lawmakers urge VA to take 'bold action' against bureaucracy

Nicholson defends agency's health care

By Kelly Kennedy

kellykennedy@militarytimes.com

Citing an ongoing battle between bureaucracy and the nation's veterans, lawmakers demanded that Department of Veterans Affairs officials take immediate action to address delays in and access to medical care.

"We want it done today or yesterday or last week, and we know you do, too," Rep. Bob Filner, D-Calif., House Veterans' Affairs Committee chairman, told VA officials May 9.

Committee members were responding to a report from a task force formed by President Bush to look at gaps in services for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush called for the task force after dilapidated buildings and a bureaucratic morass at Walter Reed Army Medical Center drew attention to the Defense Department's outpatient care for wounded troops.

But VA Secretary James Nicholson told the committee that the task force members had to come up with recommendations that did not require additional funding, leaving their hands tied to some extent.

House Democrats also pointed out that none of the task force's recommendations were particularly new — in fact, several of them had appeared in reports dating back to 1999, but had never been implemented.

"It's the implementation that is extremely important," said Rep. Michael Michaud, D-Maine. "These reports are not going to do any good unless we act upon them."

In his testimony, Nicholson sought to steer clear of the problems that have been highlighted within the Defense Department health care system, even going so far as to express frustration that people think VA was involved in the problems at Walter Reed, an Army hospital. Instead, he talked about recent awards VA has received for being the best health care system in the U.S., as well as a pilot study that brought staph infections down by 70 percent.

Committee members, however, wanted to focus on other issues, such as:

- Testimony on Capitol Hill last month from the parents of veteran Lance Bailey, who had post-traumatic stress disorder and died after overdosing on medication given to him by a VA facility in Los Angeles.

- Reports that a former Marine, Jonathan Schulze, committed suicide after calling VA in St. Cloud, Minn., to ask for help and reportedly being told he would be placed on a waiting list.

- A report in the North County (Calif.) Times newspaper that quoted a VA surgeon

in La Jolla, Calif., as saying his facility has an 18-month waiting list and a backlog of 500 patients waiting for orthopedic surgery because of staffing shortages.

- An observation from Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., that a shuttle service in Las Vegas had left veterans stranded two days earlier because VA had not paid a \$600,000 bill.

"All my veterans were stranded because we didn't pay this guy," Berkley said. "This is no way to run a business."

But when asked if VA had the funding and staffing it needed, Nicholson replied: "Yes, VA is adequately staffed to take care of this mission that we have. The VA health care system is, I think, doing an extraordinary job."

Filner took issue with that. "If you had said that in a town hall meeting that any of us have led, they would have laughed you off the stage," he said.

Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., cited the VA's payment of more than \$3.8 million in bonuses to the same officials who oversaw a \$1 billion budget shortfall a few months ago — including a bonus to an administrator who heads the disability benefits

system, which now takes an average of six months to make a decision on a new benefits claim.

Nicholson said he would like to clarify his answer, and then said, "We can probably always make good use of more money."

Committee members said they want regular updates on what actions are being taken on the recommendations of Bush's task force, as well as answers on other veterans' issues, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury funding to the long distances some veterans must travel for health care.

Lawmakers asked again about the status of a computerized medical records system that would allow VA and the Defense Department to quickly and efficiently transfer medical records for people moving from the military to the VA health care system, which would shorten the bureaucratic holdups that come while veterans wait for the transfer of paper documents.

"This is really getting serious and I would say unprecedented command focus," Nicholson said. But Filner argued that the changes aren't coming quickly enough, and that people are ready for "bold action."

"We agree with you that there are tremendous good things happening at the VA," Filner said, but added: "It looks to me that we're allowing the bureaucratic needs ... to set the pace rather than the needs of the veterans. We can't wait." □



'The VA health system is, I think, doing an extraordinary job.'

JAMES NICHOLSON
SECRETARY OF VETERANS
AFFAIRS

Service Members & Families



1-800-342-9647

CALL NOW!

We're Available 24/7!

www.militaryonesource.com

- **Private, Local Counseling**
- **Spouse Employment**
- **Child Care**
- **Money Matters**
- **Deployment**

Provided at no cost by the Department of Defense for active duty, Guard and Reserve (regardless of activation status) and their families.

You name it. We can help.

A virtual extension of installation services.