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Fisher House chief targets red tape

By Kelly Kennedy

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After helping heal hundreds of service members at Fisher House comfort homes across the nation, Ken Fisher said the failures in the health care system for wounded troops and veterans that have been revealed in the wake of the controversy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center have both surprised and angered him.

And he's still mad: As the Pentagon and Department of Veterans Affairs search for solutions, Fisher said they keep stumbling over delays in staffing, technology and ingrained bureaucratic culture.

"I don't understand why anything is held up anywhere," he said. "We've lost a little momentum and we need to get that back."

Fisher, chairman of the Fisher House Foundation, which builds comfort homes near military and VA medical facilities so families of the wounded can be near them while they recuperate, recently

served on the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors. The commission ultimately recommended more than 40 changes, all but six of which require no congressional action.

One of the most significant recommendations was to provide each seriously injured service member a single case manager to stick with him through the entire process.

Pentagon officials went to Capitol Hill last week with a long list of changes they have already made.

But the Government Accountability Office issued a report that said the Army's Wounded Warrior Brigade, a new organizational structure meant to guide service members through the disability process — to include assigning case managers — is still only half-staffed.

On the VA side, officials are not even sure how many case managers are needed because no one has come up with a standard definition of "seriously injured."

A group of lawmakers met with about three dozen troops at Walter Reed in September who said they are still spiraling through a convoluted system.

Both the Senate and the House have yet to pass "wounded warrior" legislation introduced months ago to address many of these issues.

"According to the GAO, nothing has changed drastically," Fisher said. "We've got to make the process less cumbersome."

Public vs. private

In his world — a place where the private sector kicked in to help the troops once it became clear the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would go on much longer than anticipated — administrators kept up with the unexpected influx of injured troops.

There were no questions of how to make it happen, just a drive to make it happen, he said. But because he worked with troops in

the early stages of their injuries, he did not become aware of shortfalls in the medical disability evaluation system — or the months or years it could take to get through the process.

When he did learn the true scope of the problems from his participation on the presidential commission, he said, "It took me by surprise. I had no idea."

In fact, the private sector took advantage of the public's zeal to support the troops to create a multitude of nonprofits offering everything from housing to medical care to equipment, he said. When the Pentagon made plans to build a new Center for the Intrepid in San Antonio for seriously wounded veterans, \$50 million was raised from the private sector in a matter of months.

"The private sector is cheaper and quicker," Fisher said, "and much less cumbersome. We don't have the same bureaucratic red

tape. We positioned the foundation to catch the wave."

Fisher said the government could learn a few things from the way his foundation and other charitable groups operate, particularly in being more "transparent."

"If you donate to us, you can see where the money goes," he said. "The growth factor is off the charts."

Six or seven new Fisher Houses will be built this year, and 22 to 23 within the next four years, which will bring the total to 60.

"After 9/11, we all knew this was coming," he said. "Everything was done to gear up for coming action."

Fisher also railed against a culture in which, over generations, significant stigma has wrapped itself around such issues as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injuries.

The military culture also shies away from blowing the whistle when something's wrong, he said.

"There's a stigma associated with ... being specifically seen as a whistle-blower," he said. "I don't think anyone wanted to get up and say, 'This system has gone to hell in a handbasket.'" □



Fisher

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