

Save the VA provides update, suffers setback

September 18, 2012 3:30 am • [By Brett Nachtigall](#)

HOT SPRINGS – “We’re going to Save the VA!” were the words first spoken by Rich Gross of Hot Springs as he took the podium at the Sept. 11 Patriot Day Program held last week at the Hot Springs Post 71 American Legion.

Citing the reasons for his predicted victory to keep open the Hot Springs VA, Gross, a spokesperson for the Save the VA Campaign, identified three things the community has going for it, which he said were essential when going up against a bureaucracy like the Veterans Administration.

“We have ideas that are better than the other side ... We’re wiser and we’re smarter ... We have passion for what is right,” he said.

Subduing his original excitement however, as he described the progress the Save the VA had been making with the VISN 23 (the Midwest’s Veterans Integrated Service Network), was Gross’s announcement of a setback suffered just one day prior to the Patriot Day gathering last Tuesday.

Despite a May 18, 2012, letter from VA Secretary Eric Shinseki that said he was looking forward to the VISN 23 representatives working closely with the Save the VA representatives, Gross said negotiations were abruptly cut off after just two meetings, when at the end of last Monday’s meeting, they were informed of the VISN’s decision to submit their original proposal to Washington, D.C., which recommended the closure of the Hot Springs VA.

“We were completely blindsided and surprised by what happened yesterday,” Gross said. “We were expecting negotiations to continue as it has been and continue to make progress ... their proposal went in; they would send in our proposal with their comments, and as they said ‘insights.’ It was obvious something had happened within the last 30 days and the train was no longer being driven from the VISN, or local area, but from someplace else.”

Gross said the VA’s decision to cutoff negotiations and stray away from their original plan of working together had angered, not only the local the Save the VA representatives, but also the state’s congressional delegation who had advised the Save the VA to first attempt to work with the VISN before taking its proposal to Washington, D.C.

Despite the perceived setback with the negotiations, Gross said the Save the VA Campaign is undeterred by this most recent roadblock but instead optimistic that the time spent analyzing the proposal has helped make their case stronger.

“The next step is we’ll be going to Washington,” Gross said. “With a proposal that has been vetted through the process. With a proposal that has the support of our congressional delegation.”

Gross then said that the current congressional delegation in support of keeping the Hot Springs VA is continuing to grow as a senator from Nebraska recently joined forces with the South Dakota delegation, following the events that unfolded on Monday.

Gross concluded his speech with a plea for Hot Springs VA supporters to continue the fight and to enter into the next phase of the process, which he said, should be another letter writing campaign to congress – specifically the state’s U.S. Senator Tim Johnson who is the head of the subcommittee that oversees the finances of the VA.

“I assure you, we are going to win this thing,” Gross said. “We are going to Save the VA.”

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Guest Editorial- Save the VA plan a shining example for the nation

September 17, 2012 11:17 am

By Justin Gausman,

Save the VA Campaign member

On August 31, 2012, President Barack Obama signed an executive order pledging to “take steps to meet the current and future demand for mental health and substance abuse treatment services for veterans, service members, and their families.”

This order includes a guarantee that any veteran contemplating suicide has direct contact with a mental health professional within 24 hours, hiring at least 800 veterans to serve as counselors for other vets, and the implementation of a long-term mental health study emphasizing injuries unique to veterans.

The executive order stands as a re-dedication to over 2 million service members who have fought valiantly over the past decade. But many of you may wonder how this ultimately affects Hot Springs and our VA?

In the executive order, President Obama directs the VA to create no fewer than 15 “pilot projects” in rural areas where the VA has had difficulties hiring mental health providers. The VA would “contract or develop formal arrangements with community based providers. . . to test the effectiveness of community partnerships in helping to meet the mental health needs of veterans in a timely way.”

Sound familiar? Yes, the VA’s plan is to implement on a national level test versions of the proposal they offered us here in Hot Springs.

No one would disagree how crucial it is that veterans suffering from service-related mental health injuries get immediate help. However, Save the VA’s research has shown that contracting care to non-VA facilities is a risky undertaking, often filled with broken promises, broken contracts, and underwhelming care to those veterans most in need.

Fall River Health Services, in their report for Save the VA, stated, “To date, any suggestions or proposals made directly by the VA to FRHS have been very vague, at best—lacking any detail or sense of a business plan.” The VA has made only loose attempts to communicate with local providers here and in the region served by Hot Springs. How receptive will other rural community providers be to this proposal?

The Native American Committee of Save the VA testified that Indian Health Services is already overwhelmed, and “for both addiction and PTSD treatment, the mental health facilities of the VA

system are critical. This type of support is nearly non-existent on the reservations, and what is available is not specifically geared to the needs of veterans.”

I agree with President Obama that no veteran should have to wait for health care, mental or otherwise. But the plan to increase contracts in rural areas is only putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound. The VA, regardless of the party in power, appears to be interested only in immediate cost-saving measures, regardless of their long-term feasibility or effect on the veterans themselves. Save the VA’s counter-proposal is a solution, not a quick fix, and if implemented, I predict that within the next five years, “The Veterans Town” will become a shining example for the rest of the country.

(Gausman, a Hot Springs native, is a member of the Save the VA Campaign and an independent filmmaker currently producing a documentary entitled "The Veterans Town".)

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