

Feedback Sought On Hot Springs VA Proposal

By Derek Olson

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HOT SPRINGS, SD - If you spend any time in Hot Springs, it immediately becomes clear why the veterans here are so passionate about their hospital.

"I stayed in this community because of the VA. They got me well. They got me to where I could succeed and be functional in this community and in life," veteran Wade Burns said.

Burns came to the Hot Springs VA to treat a host of injuries, including PTSD. Now he's a local business owner.

"Well, I feel successful for the first time. Honestly, it's because of the VA and the help that they've given me," Burns said.

But the VA claims that the number of vets seeking treatment is dropping and something needs to change.

"Ultimately, you're faced with a reality of a declining enrollment number. You have to consider what the right number of patients you need to have in a facility to provide safe, effective care. And you certainly want it to be the highest quality possible," acting director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System Steve DiStasio said.

The proposal would begin to shift services from the VA in Hot Springs to other health care clinics that may be closer to veterans' homes.

"What would happen if we made it possible for that veteran to get their care in the same community health care facilities that their families receive it?" DiStasio said.

However, some see the idea bringing more drawbacks than benefits.

"I don't understand why they believe that they can outsource all of these services and be more cost effective than the VA system, which is the most cost efficient health care system in our country," veteran Ed Harvey said.

Regardless of which side of the issue people fall on, they're encouraged to voice their opinions and ideas.

"We want them to reach out to us, to their elected officials and voice their opinions. And I offer that good, bad or otherwise," DiStasio said.

There are town hall meetings scheduled across the Black Hills this week where you can speak out about the cuts.

There is not yet a timeline on when a decision may be made regarding the proposed closure of the Hot Springs VA facility.

For more information, visit the [VA's Black Hills Health Care system's website](#).

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VA Closure Talk Energizes Push For Vets Home

By Shawn Neisteadt

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BRANDON, SD - The future of the VA Medical Center in Hot Springs is in limbo, after the Department of Veterans Affairs announced intentions to close or relocate services in the Black Hills. That's also the location of the state's only nursing home for veterans and has East River nursing home advocates saying it's time to move forward with plans for a new facility.

Construction work is part of life right now at Bethany Meadows Senior Living Center in Brandon. They're working to add 58 rooms to the current facility. But if leaders here had their way, that wouldn't be the only construction work happening. They'd like to build the only East River nursing home for veterans.

"We believe there is a definite need and for people to travel all the way across the state to Hot Springs and into an older facility shows that there is something that needs to be done," Dennis Sever of Bethany Meadows said.

CEO Dennis Sever says while he's hoping for the best for the Hot Springs facility, the questions arising in the Black Hills underscore the need for a second veterans' home in the state.

"I think the state and federal government need to get along in making sure that we're taking good care of veterans and they're getting the care and services they need and in an area where they can stay close to family too. I think that means a lot," Sever said.

The current construction is scheduled to wrap up in July. In the best case scenario, planners say they could move from that project right into the veterans' center.

"The idea that we could just continue moving after completion of our current facility, just works into the plan," Sever said.

But before that can happen, state and federal agencies need to hammer out many details, and financing will need to be secured. But supporters say their plan is the perfect blend, and could create a public-private partnership to benefit those who have served the country.

"We also need to update our services for our veterans. They deserve more in new facilities, private rooms. The amenities that Bethany is putting towards Bethany Meadows out here in Brandon are services that I believe really fall into what those veterans needs are," Sever said.

Brandon is just one proposal for an East River facility. Other communities are expected to send proposals to the state this week.

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Business community rallies to save Hot Springs hospital



December 18, 2011 6:00 am • Mary Garrigan Journal staff

Four months ago, Misti Cantrell opened Hot Springs' only florist shop.

Last week, the owner of the Petal Palace had to wonder if that was a mistake.

Cantrell and virtually every other business owner in Hot Springs is worried about the economic consequences of a Department of Veterans Affairs proposal announced Dec. 12 that would restructure the medical services offered at the Hot Springs VA facility and relocate about 330 jobs there to Sturgis or Rapid City. A significant portion of her new business's bottom line, including about 10 bouquets she delivers to the hilltop VA campus every week, will be lost if that happens, Cantrell said.

"It's hard enough to run a business these days, especially in a small town," Cantrell said Friday from her shop in downtown Hot Springs. "We send flower arrangements up there every week. I don't know how it's going to be here if the VA closes. It will be really sad. Really sad."

The southern Black Hills town of 3,700 residents is already showing signs of its struggle to survive. Its streets are dotted with shuttered storefronts and the 2010 Census revealed a 10 percent drop in population since 2000. The potential exodus of another 330 well-paid wage earners from the community has Mayor Don De Vries and everyone else in Hot Springs concerned.

"If we lose those 330 or 340 jobs, it's millions of dollars in salaries that will not be spent in Hot Springs. That will just be gone," said De Vries.

The current Hot Springs VA payroll is about 380 employees and about \$20 million annually. Estimates are that perhaps 55 of those jobs will remain in Hot Springs, if the VA decides to keep a community-based outpatient clinic in town. The average annual VA salary at the Hot Springs campus is \$53,565, not including benefits. Twenty-one VA employees there earn more than \$100,000 yearly (without benefits) and the median salary is \$50,117, a VA spokeswoman said.

As a retailer who relies on other people's discretionary household income for her own profits, those jobs are a big part of Cantrell's customer base. "Oh, definitely it's definitely going to affect my customer base. I have a lot of customers that work up there," she said.

The loss of 330 jobs, many of them white-collar ones, could pull almost \$18 million out of the local economy, said Scott Haden, executive director of the Hot Springs Area Chamber of Commerce.

"That's huge," Haden said.

The ripple effect will mean more empty storefronts and increased competition for customers among remaining restaurants, grocery stores and retailers, extrapolating those direct VA job losses to other businesses in town. Some estimates say a VA closure would cost the community about 1,000 jobs, said Gary Slagel, who owns the local hardware store with his wife, Terry.

The hardware store has been in Terry Slagel's family since 1935, and the couple worries that it will be hard to keep the business profitable without VA paychecks that get spent on everything from spare keys to Lazy-Boy recliners at the smalltown store.

"We'll be wondering if we can make it," Gary Slagel said. "One thing's for sure, this store will look very different four years from now if the VA closes."

De Vries compares the impact of losing the VA in Hot Springs to the economic dislocation that the loss of Ellsworth Air Force Base would wreak on the economy of Rapid City.

"It's very devastating to the community. I hate to say it's the nail in the coffin of Hot Springs," De Vries said. "But this could seriously impact the number of people living in Hot Springs by the next Census."

At Dale's Family Restaurant on Friday, owner and cook Cindy Wedekind was busy flipping burgers and making fried cod lunch specials for customers like Ronald and Theresa Sterling of Scottsbluff, Neb.

"We always stop here. This is a nice little restaurant," said Ronald Sterling, who had just come from an eye appointment at the VA medical complex. If VA services are moved to Rapid City or Fort Meade, Sterling said he'll have no reason to spend money in Hot Springs.

"We wouldn't drive through. We'll probably just bypass the town on the way to Rapid City on Highway 79," he said.

"It would hurt us," said Wedekind said veterans like Sterling account for perhaps half of her business.

"It would hurt us," Wedekind said. "There's no question it would hurt all of us. I'm hoping it won't happen because half the town's for sale now. This would really reduce the value of my property."

Hot Springs has watched as a reduction in personnel and services happened over the years - from surgery to the laundry services that were moved to Fort Meade in 1998. Rumors of impending changes have been around so long, people got used to hearing them, Haden said.

Terry Slagel grew up in Hot Springs and she's heard talk of VA cutbacks and closures most of her life.

"But this, this is the most serious it has ever been," she said.

Slagel accuses VA administrators of not bringing townspeople into the discussion soon enough.

"To give us two months over the Christmas holidays to make our case, that seems unfair to the community," she said.

Like a lot of Hot Springs residents, Margaret Hunter said she was feeling "duped" by VA administrators, who sent mixed messages over the years about the viability of VA jobs and programs. But Hunter said her town will fight hard to keep the VA facility that has defined Hot Springs for so long.

"People are hopeful of changing their minds. We're optimistic that we can turn it around," Hunter said. "Because if we don't and they move it, this town's done."

Gary Slagel is not optimistic about averting the restructuring, but he remains hopeful that the VA can be convinced to keep more services and programs in Hot Springs than its original proposal calls for.

"I'm hopeful we can save something," he said.

Bonnie Bernard moved to Hot Springs in 2003 and was distressed by last week's news.

"I'm heartsick about it. I really am," Bernard said.

And like many of her fellow residents, she wondered why the VA thinks bigger is better when it comes to veteran care.

"Rapid City has everything already. Our little town needs something, too," she said.

De Vries said his town is in the "reaction" stage now. But that will have to change if Hot Springs is to be successful in keeping the VA facility, he knows.

Clearly, the VA is good for Hot Springs. But if closures are to be averted, the town must convince VA administrators that Hot Springs is good for the VA, too, Haden said. As mayor, De Vries wants to focus on a proactive approach to keeping as many VA facilities and services in Hot Springs as possible.

"What I've been hearing is that we as a community should figure out some way to keep as many VA services here as we can," De Vries said.

On Wednesday, community leaders will begin the process of making their case to VA administrators on why Hot Springs makes better medical and financial sense as a place for veterans care. At a town meeting at 7 p.m. on Dec. 21, officials will create working committees that will be given the tough task of proving what Terry Slagel and so many others in Hot Springs already believe: "We are the veterans town."

Mary Allen Goulet was distributing posters for Wednesday's meeting at businesses around town Friday. The poster shows the wooden sign on a hillside just outside town that proclaims "Hot Springs Welcomes Veterans." Goulet doesn't believe that ailing or disabled veterans would be as welcomed and embraced in a larger community like Rapid City as they are in the small town atmosphere of Hot Springs.

"This town is a vets town," Goulet said. "They like it here. We like having them here."

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Aging buildings, low census prompt VA's proposal to move to Rapid City



December 19, 2011 6:30 am • Kevin Woster Journal staff

HOT SPRINGS -- Ken Bradfield tells a common story among those who served their country and now get their health care from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in the southern Black Hills community that calls itself "The Veterans Town."

The Hot Springs facility is, simply, the best place he has ever found for treatment -- both medical and personal.

"I come here three times a week for dialysis," Bradfield said as he sat in the outpatient clinic waiting room. "In 2011, I've been in seven medical facilities and five hospitals, and this is easily the most cordial and friendly. Closing this place will have too much impact on the community, and on us veterans."

Both the community and those concerned veterans in and around Hot Springs are coming together in opposition to a proposal announced last week to restructure the VA's Black Hills Health Care System in a way they believe will hurt the town and the veterans it serves.

But there are many veterans in other towns with VA facilities that help them, even if not on the scale that Hot Springs does now. And the roles of those other communities and their health care systems in treating veterans would increase under the proposal to develop a new outpatient clinic in Hot Springs and the existing VA Medical Center here, most of which is more than 100 years old.

Age is part of the problem. As beautiful as the old sandstone structures are, sitting as they do in prominence above downtown Hot Springs, they are inefficient to operate and difficult to maintain. Their veteran base for in-patient medical services is shrinking, now down in the already downsized 10-bed acute care hospital to an unworkable average census of 5 occupied beds a night.

The nursing care wing of the same hospital has just seven beds to begin with and has an average census of 4.6 beds in use.

The concern there is about more than economics, too, said Steve DeStasio, acting director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System. It's about the quality and safety of the care being offered to veterans, he said.

It's essential for medical providers to have a consistent flow of patients in order to "maintain clinical competency," DiStasio said. "I don't think we've reached the point yet where we're developing unsafe care, but that's certainly a vulnerability that we might have."

DiStasio argues that partnerships with private medical providers, such as Fall River Hospital, could help assure quality care for veterans in facilities close to their homes. It also could bolster those private facilities, both in increased patient flows and by providing qualified staff from the closing VA facility.

Jan Murphy, VA network director for the upper Midwest, calls such ventures the future of health care in the United States, something the VA can and should be part of.

The complex already works in partnership with the private sector in providing dialysis treatment to non-veteran patients. Debra Dodson, executive assistant to DiStasio, said that extra patient flow is the only reason the VA center can maintain the dialysis for veterans in Hot Springs.

The VA complex also cooperates with the local Meals on Wheels program, providing the daily offering there to the community meals program in bulk. Expanding partnerships overall is part of the restructuring plan, but with that expansion would come profound changes in Hot Springs.

Such prospects are unsettling to Bradfield, who is from Hot Springs, and Ken Barker, a veteran from Edgemont. They have care they can trust already and aren't eager for change.

Even though an outpatient clinic is part of the VA plan for Hot Springs, Barker prefers the current system and its care and treatment options.

"I sure like it a lot better here than up in Rapid City," he said.

Some things have already moved from Hot Springs. Surgical procedures in the hospital are now being limited to outpatient procedures. More serious operations go to the Fort Meade Medical Center near Sturgis, other VA facilities or private providers.

The VA proposal would build new operating rooms and make other improvements at the Fort Meade complex. It also would expand and improve the existing VA clinic in Rapid City and build a domiciliary treatment center for PTSD, substance abuse, homelessness and other issues.

Critics of the plan say the busier, noisier more tempting environment in Rapid City is a less-desirable environment for PTSD treatment and those struggling with substance abuse. And there's no doubt that the environment at the Hot Springs domiciliary -- or the dom, as residents and workers call it -- is peaceful and productive.

"I like being here," said Lawrence Woods, a veteran from Denver, Colo., who is finishing up two months of PTSD treatment and a job preparedness program. "It's historic. And it's peaceful, nice and quiet. It's a good place to come."

Woods said the PTSD treatment program was "intense, but it helps you deal with your traumas."

Woods talked about the dom and its treatment as he and a friend, John Fultz, took a cigarette break outside in the central courtyards of the wheel-shaped building complex. Fultz, who is also from Denver, said he was in a productive work program designed to help him find and keep a job.

Asked about the peaceful nature of the dom and its surrounding community, Fultz said: "It's all right, but I'm still going back to Denver."

Woods said he will return to Denver as well, affirming a reality that Murphy said makes it essential to prepare veterans for more challenging communities.

"Part of our job for veterans going through these programs is to help them to live in the real world, because the majority will leave Hot Springs," Murphy said. "We have to look at the entire spectrum and really teach veterans how to cope in the world they may be going back to, wherever that world may be."

DiStasio said he respects the veterans who say the quiet environment of Hot Springs worked better for them and their treatment. But other veterans have other priorities, including better access to work opportunities and more housing options, DiStasio said.

The proposal is for a new dom in Rapid City, and to close the dom in Hot Springs along with the rest of the facility. DiStasio said that's not the final word from the VA, however, which is what a string of public meetings with veterans and others is all about.

But it's clear that the VA has an idea of where it wants to go.

"A key component is talking about reducing the travel for our veterans," DiStasio said. "In places like Scottsbluff and Pierre, it might make sense to purchase more care in local hospitals closer to where veterans live."

Which does not mean anything is set in stone, he said.

"There are no done deals here," DiStasio said. "We want to have these conversations."

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Veterans at state home worry about VA health changes

December 20, 2011 5:00 am • Kevin Woster Journal staff

Residents at the state veterans' home in Hot Springs have more to fret about these days than how congressional budget battles will affect funding for a proposed \$34.6 million upgrade at the facility.

They are also watching with concern as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs outlines its proposal to close the main Hot Springs VA Medical Center in their community as part of a restructuring plan in the Black Hills.

Larry Wilcox, superintendent of the Michael J. Fitzmaurice South Dakota Veterans Home, said worry is widespread among the 131 residents now at the home. They rely on the VA center across town for health care services that are high quality and familiar, Wilcox said.

"They're concerned," he said. "They know all the health care providers up there."

If the current VA proposal stands, most of the sprawling VA medical center on a hill above downtown Hot Springs would close. That would end a century of in-patient services that eventually included acute care and nursing home needs as well as more recent treatment programs for post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and homelessness.

But the VA proposal would maintain an out-patient clinic in Hot Springs and seek to develop partnerships with the Fall River Hospital for in-patient medical care previously offered by the VA.

VA officials proposing the plan argue that the restructuring will provide better health care options for veterans overall and could result in meaningful financial savings over time.

One option for the new out-patient VA clinic would be to locate it on the grounds of the veterans' home, something Wilcox said state officials are ready to discuss.

"We're open-minded. We're willing to work with the VA any way we can, because all of our veterans go there for medical care," he said. "We've got 193 acres of ground and the existing campus is on 26 acres. In remodeling, it's a wide-open field."

The campus, which was established more than 100 years ago, is already preparing for extensive change in the planned building project to upgrade veterans residential and care options. The state Legislature has approved a 35 percent funding match on the project which could cost \$34.6 million. The other 65 percent would come from federal funding.

The current census of 131 at the veterans' home includes 52 getting nursing-home care and the rest in assisted living and independent living. About 75 percent of those veterans are from World War II or Korea and 25 percent are Vietnam veterans.

The age of the World War II and Korean vets means "we're going to have a lull in the number of vets" in the near future, Wilcox said.

So the new facility would initially house 100 people, with a 25-bed addition planned for later. Also being planned is a 50-bed veterans home that would be built somewhere East River for aging veterans in the eastern part of South Dakota who would otherwise have to move to Hot Springs.

That East River facility is being proposed as a partnership operation with a private nursing home provider. Lt. Gov. Matt Michels said that under that plan, the private provider would build the facility and lease it back to the state under an operational contract with that provider.

That plan would save the state capital investment costs, an enticing option coming off a period of profound budget struggles and faltering state revenues. Michels, who handles veterans affairs issues for the governor's office, said the state had an encouraging response from private industry.

"The important thing for all of us to understand, however, is that the cheapest part of any of these types of projects is building the building. The most expensive is the people and long-term support, heating and ventilation and all the costs."

When asked about the VA restructuring plan for the Black Hills, Michels said he was "still absorbing it." But the state is committed to working with the VA to provide continued medical care for residents of the state veterans' home, he said.

"The access to the VA clinic, if indeed that is the direction they're going to take, is something we need to maintain and assure is convenient for our veterans. They've earned that," Michels said. Limiting the need to transport veterans for treatment is a benefit to the state, Michels said.

"Our goals are very, very specific relative to the care for our veterans who come to the state veterans home," he said. "We want to make that care as convenient for them as possible."

Wilcox said it is important that the state work hard to encourage the VA to maintain as many health care services as possible in Hot Springs.

"We'll want to sit down with the VA, as I'm sure the governor's office will be doing, and work to maintain as much VA care in Hot Springs as we can," Wilcox said. "If it's good for the community, it's going to be good for our veterans, too."

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