

VA

One year removed from ‘The Proposal’



December 11, 2012 12:05 am • [By Curt Nettinga](#)

A look back at the past 12 months since the VA announced its intent to reconfigure veterans' health care in the region

HOT SPRINGS – Outrage. Frustration. Disbelief.

All of these emotions and many more were evident one year ago, when word spread through the Hot Springs community that the VA Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS), which had a more than 100 year relationship with the city, was proposing to shutter its current facility.

The original proposal forwarded on Dec. 12, 2011, first to VA employees and then to a standing-room-only town hall meeting at the Mueller Civic Center, called for closing of the Medical Center in Hot Springs, to be replaced by a Community Based Outpatient Clinic. The Domiciliary, home to the VA's PTSD and Substance Abuse therapies would be closed; to be rebuilt in Rapid City. Local hospital care for veterans was to be contracted with Fall River Health Services. It was expected that more than 300 jobs would be removed from the area in the proposal, over a period of five years.

Those interested were given two to three months to respond to the proposal.

Another emotion was also born that evening – Resolve.

Within a week, hundreds of people from the community had begun forming committees, aimed at refuting and checking information included in the VA's proposal, while forming a proposal of its own.

Save the VA Campaign grew from those grass roots beginnings, and through numerous meetings, fundraising events, benefit dinners and auctions, a closely knit group emerged.

National groups stopped in Hot Springs; first, in January, an American Legion “System worth Saving” task force, which had been scheduled earlier. S.D. Representative Kristi Noem came to town on Feb. 4, to another standing-room-only crowd, this time at the American Legion.

Also in January, the congressional delegation sent an extensive letter to Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, questioning many of the ideas put forth in the VA's proposal. Throughout the large area served by the Hot Springs VA, many other meetings were held by the BHHCS, to share its proposal with the veterans it serves. By a large percentage, the proposal was not well received.

In early February, plans were already shaping up for the largest show of support to that point – the Welcome Home Ride, in which more than 1,000 people rode horses, drove vehicles or walked from the Legion to the VA, via the street near Fall River and up Fifth Street, to a rally outside the main entrance to the Domiciliary.

Many of the participants at that rally on Feb. 25 were Native American veterans from the Pine Ridge Reservation, who receive their health care at the Hot Springs VA. Later last summer, the Save the VA group said thank you to the Native Americans, by sponsoring a meal and gift-giving ceremony at the 24th Annual Veterans Day Pow Wow in Pine Ridge.

The task force recommendations report surfaced in late March, not surprisingly recommending no service changes, keeping the Domiciliary where it is and noting that many veterans felt that their opinions didn't count and they felt the VA was moving to quickly.

Also in March, Don Ackerman, a veteran who was wary of the VA and its plans six months before the proposal, was recognized as the Citizen of the Year by the Hot Springs Area Chamber of Commerce.

April was a busy month, as an extension to the comment period was requested and approved. On April 9, the VA campus in Hot Springs was recognized as a National Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This was on top of the National Landmark status bequeathed by the National Parks Service in July of 2011. The campus had long been on the National Register of Historic Places.

On April 12, Representative Noem was back, and this time she brought along S.D. Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune along for a huge listening session and tour of the VA.

In early May, the Save the VA group released a statement, which said their proposal was nearly complete, but that the VA had not complied with all of the Freedom Of Information Act requests. This was a common theme throughout the first half of the year.

In June, the VA released its financial analysis on its proposal. Few people in the community were surprised when the VA's analysis, compiled by Chris Stromber from the Veterans Integrated Service Network 23 – the next step up the food chain from the BHHCS – showed that the original proposal was the most cost effective.

On June 30, after a community thank you dinner, Save the VA released its own proposal. It focused on not only retaining the PTSD and Substance Abuse Therapy in Hot Springs, but expanding it to a national program. To assist in the job training portion of the proposal, a new

veteran's owned and operated business would be created, to teach the job skills and management know-how for veterans to use to reintegrate into society.

At its unveiling, Save the VA spokesman Rich Gross spoke of creating a national model, which other VAs could copy. Money from sales generated by the business would be turned over to the VA to aid in the care of those in the program.

In July and August, Save the VA and the BHHCS began negotiations to arrive at a consensus project to forward to Washington for approval. On Sept. 11, at a Patriot Day event in Hot Springs, Gross revealed that the VA had abruptly ended negotiations the previous day, and would be forwarding its original proposal to Washington.

Twice in October, the congressional delegation sent letters to Sect. Shinseki, the first to request a meeting on the VA, which the delegation asked take place in Hot Springs. Later in the month, a second letter was sent, this time expressing that the delegation "strongly opposed" the VA proposal. Again a meeting in Hot Springs was requested.

As of Dec. 11, no response has been received at any of the elected official's offices.

Looking forward, it's difficult to discern what will take place over the next 12 months. Will the VA's proposal turn out to be, as initially believed by many, actually its plan all along? Will those making the decisions in Washington, D.C. listen to what the majority of those in the area are saying?

And will the hundreds of hours of volunteer labor put forth by those involved in the Save the VA group and the citizens at large be rewarded with the retention of the services offered to the nation's veterans?

Timeline relating to the Hot Springs VA

June 25, 2011 – S.D. American Legion passes a resolution for the VA to remain in Hot Springs

Dec. 12 – VA Black Hills Health Care System holds meetings with employees and a public meeting to release its proposal to change veterans healthcare in the region.

Dec. 14 – Community begins organizing into what will become the Save the VA Campaign, to create a counter to the VA proposal.

Dec. 2011 and Jan. 2012 – The BHHCS holds public meetings throughout service area to explain the proposal. Most in attendance express unhappiness with the contents of the plan.

Jan. 4, 2012 – S.D. Congressional delegation send a letter to Dept. of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, questioning the proposal and requesting answers to specific questions.

Jan. 10 – Members of the National American Legion's "A System Worth Saving" team arrives for a scheduled visit to the VA campus, gathering information for a report.

Feb. 4 – Representative Kristi Noem visits Hot Springs.

Feb. 25 – The Save the VA Campaign hosts more than 1,000 people for a “Welcome Home” ride, including numerous Native Americans from the Pine Ridge Reservation on horseback.

Feb. 29 – Congressional delegation requests extension to the comment period allowed by the VA, due to lack of compliance with Freedom of Information Act requests.

March – Deadline for comments extended to April 30 by the VA.

March 16 – At a Washington, D.C. hearing, Senator Tim Johnson grills Sect. Shinseki about the VA proposal and Shinseki promises to take a “hard look” at the Save the VA’s counter proposal.

March 20 – The report from the “A System Worth Saving” visit in January is issued, recommending no change to the service unless a new facility was built; and recommending that the Domiciliary remain in Hot Springs.

April 9 – Hot Springs VA Campus recognized as a National Treasure, by the National Trust of Historic Preservation. In July of 2011 it was granted National Landmark status by the U.S. Parks Service.

April 12 – Senators Johnson and Thune and Representative Noem hold a listening session in Hot Springs and tour the VA facility.

May 10 – Comment period extended to June 30 by the VA, to finish FOIA requests.

May 18 – Sect. Shinseki states in a letter he is “looking forward to the people in VISN 23 working with the Save the VA Campaign on the proposals.”

May 30 – National Landmark plaque received from the U.S. Parks Service

May 31 – Federal Section 106 Consultation begins, stipulating the steps that must be taken when historical sites are impacted.

June 9 – Save the VA sponsors a portion of the 24th Annual Veterans Pow Wow on the Pine Ridge Reservation as a thank you for participating in the Welcome Home ride in February.

June 10 – VA releases financial analysis, completed by a VISN employee, which shows the original proposal as being the most cost effective.

June 30 – Save the VA hosts community dinner and releases its proposal.

July –August – Negotiations between Save the VA and BHHCS on difference in proposals.

Sept. 11 – Save the VA spokesperson Rich Gross reveals that the VA abruptly ended negotiations and will forward its original proposal to Washington, D.C.

Oct. 2 – Elected officials from South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming request a meeting in Hot Springs with Sect. Shinseki.

Oct. 24 – Delegation sends second letter, reiterating meeting request and “strongly opposing” the VA’s proposal.

Save the VA committees have continued to meet since talks broke down.

No response had been received from Sec. Shinseki’s office as of Dec. 11.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/one-year-removed-from-the-proposal/article_ffee9eae-42e3-11e2-94bf-001a4bcf887a.html

Dec 12 2012

Rep. Noem Recognizes One Year Anniversary of VA Hot Springs Proposal

Calls on Secretary Shinseki to Respond to Multiple Meeting Requests

Washington, D.C. – Rep. Kristi Noem issued the following statement on the one year anniversary of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) proposal to close the Medical Center in Hot Springs:

“One year ago, residents in Hot Springs were blindsided by a proposal that would shutter operations at the Medical Center and turn their community upside down. From the start, the community has been involved in trying to work with the VA, and its commitment to veterans and the Medical Center is inspirational.

“When the proposal was announced, the VA promised an open and transparent process, and Secretary Eric Shinseki also made assurances to that. Regretfully, that has not been the case. Furthermore, the VA has essentially discounted the tremendous effort put into a counterproposal by stakeholders in Hot Springs.

“Multiple attempts to engage Secretary Shinseki have been overlooked. Over two months ago, I was joined by seven members of Congress in requesting a meeting with the Secretary. We have not received a response and additional requests and phone calls have yet to yield results.

“I remain committed to ensuring our veterans continue to receive the highest quality of care. Unfortunately, the VA has grossly mishandled its proposal for Hot Springs. While I am frustrated by the failings of the VA, my resolve to fight for this community is stronger than ever. I will continue advocating for the people of Hot Springs and will not take the pressure off the VA.”

<http://noem.house.gov/index.cfm/2012/12/rep-noem-recognizes-one-year-anniversary-of-va-hot-springs-proposal>

Noem frustrated with progress at VA Medical center in Hot Springs

Thursday, 13 December 2012 12:02

South Dakota Representative Kristi Noem says she's frustrated with the lack of progress, a year after the V-A proposal to close the Medical Center in Hot Springs.

In a conference call with reporters, Noem says the South Dakota Congressional delegation has asked for meetings to discuss counterproposals with Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, and says that no meetings are scheduled. Noem says she has called Shinseki's office to speak with him on the phone and says she was told that isn't going to happen. She says she will continue to push for the best outcome for the people and veterans of Hot Springs.

Jack Caudill

<http://www.blackhillsfox.com/2012/12/13/Noem-frustrated-with-progress-at-VA-Medical-center-in-Hot-Springs>

Noem, Thune upset with VA over Hot Springs

Head of Veterans Affairs won't talk about proposal, Republicans say

Written by David Montgomery

One year after the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs proposed closing the medical center in Hot Springs, some of South Dakota's representatives in Congress say the department isn't being responsive to concerns from them and the Hot Springs community.

Rep. Kristi Noem and Sen. John Thune, both Republicans, said they're upset with the VA's approach.

"It has been just over a year since the VA proposed changes to the Black Hills Health Care System, and we have made it clear that we oppose those changes and would like to see the VA negotiate in good faith with the Hot Springs community about a way forward," Thune said in a statement. "I am incredibly frustrated at the lack of response to our October letter requesting a meeting in Hot Springs to discuss their proposed changes."

Noem said she has been rebuffed in her attempts to speak to Eric Shinseki, the department's secretary.

"I called over there several times and visited with an assistant secretary. ... I asked if I could have a phone call with the secretary, and she indicated that would not happen," Noem said Thursday.

As she prepares to start her second term in Congress, Noem said other Cabinet secretaries in President Obama's administration have been much more accessible.

"A couple months ago, I needed to talk to Secretary Vilsack about the farm bill. I picked up the phone, and within five minutes, I was visiting with him and having a conversation about farm policy," Noem said. "That's typically how this happens. The VA is slow-walking us."

The VA has proposed closing the Hot Springs medical center and relocating operations to Rapid City. Wednesday was the one-year anniversary of the initial proposal, and Noem said counter-proposals from residents of the town have gone unheard.

Johnson, a Democrat, didn't share the critical tone of his Republican colleagues. His spokesman, Perry Plumart, said Johnson wants to meet with Shinseki to lobby for the Hot Springs facility but doesn't see anything unusual in how the department has handled affairs.

"Senator Johnson has a good working relationship with Secretary Shinseki," Plumart said. "We've put a request in, the delegation has, to meet with them, and we look forward to doing so."

<http://www.argusleader.com/article/20121214/NEWS/312140042/>

Hot Springs community continues to fight for VA

Posted: Dec 14, 2012 4:51 PM MST

By Abby Carter, Reporter - [email](#)

It's been a year since the Veterans Administration broke the news of plans to shutter the Hot Springs Veterans Administration. Is the fight to keep it open still going strong?

Over the last year, the community of Hot Springs pulled together to create a counter proposal that was presented to the Veteran's Administration in June. The offer suggests creating manufacturing jobs for veterans in which 75 % of the profit would go back to the VA.

The VA has declined the proposal. President of save the VA Patrick Russell says he fears a decline of rural VA's all over the nation and encourages the community to rally. "If they don't stand up to save their VA's now they may not have rural health care ten, 15, to 20 years from now," said Russell "All of the major VA Medical Centers will be in urban areas and the rural veterans will be left behind."

Russell says the next step is to take their grassroots movement to Washington D.C. and draw attention to the issue on a national level.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/20350085/kota-territory-community-continues-to-fight-for-va>

Future of Black Hills VA uncertain a year after controversial medical proposal



December 16, 2012 5:30 am • [Kevin Woster Journal staff](#)

A year after the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs released a proposal to restructure its health care system in the Black Hills, a controversial plan that included closing most facilities in Hot Springs, the next step remains unclear.

So does the time frame for taking it.

VA Secretary Eric Shinseki has the proposal, along with counter proposals by Save the VA Committee and recommendations from the staff of the VA Black Hills Health Care System, including director Steve DiStasio.

Shinseki also has requests for a meeting with the Save the VA Committee of Hot Springs. And he has an early October letter from the South Dakota congressional delegation and congressional members from Wyoming and Nebraska expressing frustration over the process and requesting a meeting in Hot Springs.

South Dakota's two Republican members of Congress are tired of waiting for a reply.

"I'm frustrated. And don't know where we're at," Rep. Kristi Noem said, noting that Wednesday marked a full year since the proposal was made. "I talked to one of the assistant secretaries at the VA and asked for a phone call with the secretary. And she said that wasn't going to happen."

Noem said she also asked for a date when Shinseki could meet to discuss the issue.

"She said she'd let me know," Noem said. "She said the secretary has looked at the proposal from the community. She said he obviously still has his proposal, and she gave no other indications on actions going forward."

That's not good enough for Noem and Sen. John Thune, who have been consistently critical of the VA proposal and the failure of VA officials to modify it based on recommendations from local officials and veterans.

"It has been just over a year since the VA proposed changes to the Black Hills Health Care System, and we have made it clear that we opposed those changes and would like to see the VA negotiate in good faith with the Hot Springs community about a way forward," Thune said. "I am incredibly frustrated at the lack of response to our October letter requesting a meeting in Hot Springs to discuss their proposed changes."

Sen. Tim Johnson, the Democratic member of South Dakota's three-member congressional delegation, didn't issue a comment about the one-year anniversary of the proposal, although he did join in signing the October letter seeking a meeting.

Perry Plumart, Johnson's communications director, said he didn't consider it unusual that the secretary of the VA was taking some time in responding to the delegation.

"We have a delegation request in. We look forward to working with the VA and the secretary to come to a resolution on what's best for Hot Springs and for the veterans," Plumart said.

DiStasio said he and other Black Hills staffers were also waiting for word from Washington, D.C.

"We know that something is coming forward from the secretary's office. We don't know when," DiStasio said. "We're all waiting for that decision."

Meanwhile the system continues to operate, "recruiting staff" and providing essential medical services to veterans, DiStasio said. And maintenance and rehabilitation work is in progress on grand porches and a currently-unused Victorian-era greenhouse on the grounds of the Hot Springs VA facility, he said.

"We're spending money to make sure we maintain the integrity of those structures," he said.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/future-of-black-hills-va-uncertain-a-year-after-controversial/article_70691016-4e8a-518d-b239-ca79f4b6e353.html

Delegation gets response from Shinseki - new information on meeting

December 20, 2012 3:15 pm

WASHINGTON, D.C. –Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, along with Representative Kristi Noem announced Wednesday they had finally received a long-awaited response from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki regarding the VA Black Hills Health Care System’s proposal to shutter VA facilities in Hot Springs.

In October, the delegation and Members of Congress from Wyoming and Nebraska requested a meeting with Secretary Shinseki and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs to help determine the best way to ensure area veterans have continued access to high-quality health care.

In his response, Secretary Shinseki deferred on offering to schedule a meeting in South Dakota, but invited members of the Save the VA Committee to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with an Under Secretary.

On Thursday, however, the tide had turned in the request for a meeting.

During a phone call Thursday with Senator Johnson, Sect. Shinseki agreed to meet with representatives from the Save the VA Committee regarding the Hot Springs VA Medical Center. Johnson will host the January meeting in Washington, DC and will invite the other members of the South Dakota Congressional delegation to participate.

“I spoke with Secretary Shinseki today and emphasized how important it is that he meet with the Save the VA representatives. He agreed to my request and I am looking forward to the discussion,” said Johnson. “This meeting will ensure that Secretary Shinseki hears directly from our veterans and area communities.”

On Wednesday, all three congressional delegates had been angry at Shinseki's dismissal of meeting with the Save the VA in Hot Springs, as had been requested.

On Dec. 12, 2011, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a proposal to shutter the Medical Center in Hot Springs. The community immediately came together in a united effort to save the facility. The community submitted a counterproposal and the delegation has worked hard to ensure the VA gives it serious consideration. After negotiations between the VA and the community broke down in September, South Dakota’s delegation and Members of Congress from Wyoming and Nebraska sent a letter to Secretary Shinseki expressing concerns and requesting a meeting in Hot Springs. On October 24th the South Dakota delegation followed-up with the Secretary, reiterating its request for a meeting in South Dakota and formally opposing the VA’s proposal.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/delegation-gets-response-from-shinseki/article_23d4b2ee-4a2e-11e2-b80f-001a4bcf887a.html

Dec 19 2012

Delegation Release on Hot Springs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – U.S. Senators Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) and John Thune (R-S.D.) and Representative Kristi Noem (R-S.D.) today announced they received a long-awaited response from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki regarding the VA Black Hills Health Care System’s proposal to shutter VA facilities in Hot Springs. In October, the delegation and Members of Congress from Wyoming and Nebraska requested a meeting with Secretary Shinseki and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs to help determine the best way to ensure area veterans have continued access to high-quality health care. In his response, Secretary Shinseki deferred on offering to schedule a meeting in South Dakota, but invited members of the Save the VA Committee to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with an Under Secretary.

“I am disappointed Secretary Shinseki has denied our request to meet with the delegation and members of the Save the VA group. The situation warrants more than a meeting with Under Secretary Petzel. I’ll continue working with Secretary Shinseki to ensure the views of affected veterans, area communities, and VA employees are heard,” said Johnson.

“I am extremely disappointed by Secretary Shinseki’s response to our letter,” said Thune. “We asked for the Secretary to meet with us in Hot Springs because we believe he is the only senior official at the VA who can negotiate in good faith on this matter, and because we believe he should visit Hot Springs to see for himself the importance of this facility to our veterans and the passion of the Hot Springs community for our veterans. The offer of meeting with an Under Secretary of the VA is a non-starter as meetings with lower level individuals have resulted in wasted time, energy, and misunderstandings that can only be avoided by dealing directly with the Secretary who will ultimately decide the outcome of the Hot Springs facility. I hope that the Secretary will reconsider his offer.”

“The Secretary’s response is not good enough,” said Noem. “Eight members of Congress requested that the Secretary come to Hot Springs to meet with our veterans and the community. Deferring a meeting to his Under Secretary in Washington, D.C. is not a productive use of anyone’s time. I am disappointed that the Secretary is clearly not interested in taking a leadership role to help find a solution for our veterans. I renew my request for him to travel to South Dakota to meet with the veterans, the community and Members of Congress to discuss the best way forward.”

On December 12, 2011, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a proposal to shutter the Medical Center in Hot Springs. The community immediately came together in a united effort to save the facility. The community submitted a counterproposal and the delegation has worked hard to ensure the VA gives it serious consideration. After negotiations between the VA and the community broke down in September, South Dakota’s delegation and Members of Congress from Wyoming and Nebraska [sent a letter](#) to Secretary Shinseki expressing concerns and requesting a meeting in Hot Springs. On October 24th the South Dakota delegation

[followed-up](#) with the Secretary, reiterating its request for a meeting in South Dakota and formally opposing the VA's proposal.

<http://noem.house.gov/index.cfm/2012/12/delegation-release-on-hot-springs>

VA secretary rejects congressional delegation's request for Hot Springs meeting



December 20, 2012 5:30 am • [Kevin Woster Journal staff](#)

Thanks, but no thanks.

That essentially was the response Wednesday from U.S. Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki to a request from South Dakota's congressional delegation for a meeting in Hot Springs to discuss a proposed reorganization of VA health services in the Black Hills.

Instead of coming to Hot Springs, Shinseki suggested in a letter dated Wednesday that an undersecretary in the Department of Veterans Affairs would be available to meet on the issue. And that meeting would be in Washington, D.C., not in Hot Springs, where many VA medical facilities could be closed.

After two months of waiting, the delegation and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs were disappointed with Shinseki's reply.

"From my standpoint, it's pretty disappointing that for a year now we've been trying to negotiate in good faith and apparently all we've done is waste a lot of time," said Hot Springs Mayor Don DeVries.

For the past year DeVries and other members of the Save the VA Committee have worked with Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., and Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., in opposing a plan that would close most of the existing VA medical complex in Hot Springs and expand facilities in Rapid City and Sturgis.

The original proposal would maintain a VA clinic and dialysis unit in Hot Springs and contract for other medical services with private providers there and elsewhere. That plan also would close the existing residential rehabilitation program in Hot Springs and build a new one in Rapid City.

In his letter, Shinseki said the VA has not made a final decision on the structure of the VA health system in the Black Hills. But he noted that with a new outpatient clinic in Hot Springs, VA providers would continue to offer clinical care in a "modern, more efficient building designed to provide primary care, mental health and some specialty care."

On the question of expanding services provided by community medical providers, Shinseki said the VA had "purchased specialty and long-term care from community health-care facilities for over 20 years."

After VA discussions with community providers, financial reviews and consideration of community feedback, "we feel comfortable that if a decision is given to move forward with the ... proposal, these partnerships would be successful," Shinseki said.

DeVries said the Save the VA Committee has offered better alternatives to maintain and improve existing facilities and add work-development projects with private businesses that could benefit veterans, the VA and the community. That work continues, despite the periodic discouraging news from Washington, DeVries said.

"I'm still very hopeful he'll consider those things," DeVries said. "We're still continuing with our plans."

The three members of South Dakota's congressional delegation sent out a unified response to the Shinseki letter. And it wasn't positive.

"The secretary's response is not good enough," Noem said. "Eight members of Congress requested that the secretary come to Hot Springs and meet with our veterans and the community. Deferring a meeting to his undersecretary in Washington, D.C. is not a productive use of anyone's time."

Noem, Johnson and Thune were joined by other congressional members from Wyoming and Nebraska in signing the Oct. 2 letter to Shinseki requesting the Hot Springs meeting.

Thune said he was "extremely disappointed" in Shinseki's response. Shinseki is "the only senior official at the VA who can negotiate in good faith," Thune said. He urged the secretary to reconsider his offer.

Johnson agreed that a meeting with an undersecretary was not enough.

"I'll continue working with Sec. Shinseki to ensure the views of affected veterans, area communities and the VA employees are heard," he said.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/va-secretary-rejects-congressional-delegation-s-request-for-hot-springs/article_c3152fb9-d6dd-5df8-abbf-12da24f556fa.html



MOUNT BLOGMORE: Johnson to Shinseki: Hey, have you forgotten who pulls the purse strings?

December 20, 2012 2:02 pm • [Kevin Woster Journal staff](#)

Here's my guess at the essence of the telephone conversation between South Dakota Sen. Tim Johnson and VA Secretary Eric Shinseki:

Johnson: Good morning, Mr. Secretary, you (expletive deleted). Tim Johnson here. Say, I was just taking a break from some of my duties as CHAIRMAN of the SENATE APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY CONSTRUCTION and VETERANS AFFAIRS to check in and see if my folks from the Save the VA Committee back in God's Country can't do a little bit better than a meeting with a (expletive deleted) VA undersecretary. I'm not sayin'. I'm just sayin'...

Shinseki: Senator, goodness it's great to hear from you! I can't understand how this got so mixed up. Of course I'd be thrilled to personally meet with a group of South Dakotans. Who wouldn't? I wouldn't be thrilled to fly all the way out there to Minot for the meeting. Who would be? But I'd love to host some of your constituents here. I'll be ordering Wall Drug donuts for the occasion. Look forward to seeing you at budget hearings to come! Peace. Good cheer. Go Obama. And especially Merry Christmas!"

Or something like that.

A skeptic would figure that this is and always has been as much about political strategy as the closing, or not, of the main VA complex in Hot Springs. Sen. John Thune and Rep. Kristi Noem want to beat up on the VA - and the Obama administration - over the VA reorganization plan for the Black Hills.

Johnson wants to show sympathy to the concerns of Hot Springs officials and veterans who opposed much of the reorganization, but he wants to do it in a way that doesn't offend the White House. He also wants to show he has some policy muscle on the issue, which he does.

Interesting sequence, this delay of a response by Shinseki to an October letter from the South Dakota delegation asking for a Hot Springs meeting, then the delegation's reaction this week-sharper by Thune and Noem than by Johnson - to Shinseki offering a meeting with an

undersecretary in D.C., then Johnson coming out the following day with news that he called Shinseki and got the Save the VA Committee a meeting with the secretary.

In D.C.

It's not Hot Springs. But it shows clout, manipulated or otherwise.

It's the kind of thing a guy who might still be fairly serious about running for reelection in a couple of years might well do.

And, of course, we should always consider the possibility - unlikely as it might seem in today's harshly partisan political ring war - that's it's simple constituent service, too.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/blog/blogmore/mount-blogmore-johnson-to-shinseki-hey-have-you-forgotten-who/article_172c30c4-b914-5ae9-b6e3-da2fc324a9e4.html

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Secretary Shinseki answers delegation

December 25, 2012 12:00 am

First 'No', then 'Yes' to meeting

WASHINGTON, D.C. – It was a roller coaster week for VA supporters in Hot Springs last week, although it ended better than it started.

On Wednesday, Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, along with Representative Kristi Noem announced they had finally received a long-awaited response from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki regarding the VA Black Hills Health Care System's proposal to shutter VA facilities in Hot Springs.

In early October, the delegation and Members of Congress from Wyoming and Nebraska requested a meeting with Secretary Shinseki and members of the Save the VA Committee in Hot Springs to help determine the best way to ensure area veterans have continued access to high-quality health care.

The South Dakota delegation followed with a strongly worded letter later in October, strongly opposing the VA proposal and reiterating the request for a meeting in Hot Springs.

In his response, Secretary Shinseki refused on offering to schedule a meeting in South Dakota, but invited members of the Save the VA Committee to travel to Washington, D.C. to meet with an Under Secretary.

All three representatives expressed chagrin at the response from Secretary Shinseki.

“I am extremely disappointed by Secretary Shinseki's response to our letter,” said Thune. “We asked for the Secretary to meet with us in Hot Springs because we believe he is the only senior official at the VA who can negotiate in good faith on this matter, and because we believe he should visit Hot Springs to see for himself the importance of this facility to our veterans and the passion of the Hot Springs community for our veterans.”

“The Secretary's response is not good enough,” said Noem. “Eight members of Congress requested that the Secretary come to Hot Springs to meet with our veterans and the community. Deferring a meeting to his Under Secretary in Washington, D.C. is not a productive use of anyone's time. I am disappointed that the Secretary is clearly not interested in taking a leadership role to help find a solution for our veterans.

“I am disappointed Secretary Shinseki has denied our request to meet with the delegation and members of the Save the VA group. The situation warrants more than a meeting with Under Secretary Petzel. I'll continue working with Secretary Shinseki to ensure the views of affected veterans, area communities, and VA employees are heard,” said Johnson.

On Thursday, Johnson followed through on his vow.

“During a phone call today, U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki agreed to meet with representatives from the Save the VA Committee regarding the Hot Springs VA Medical Center,” read a release from Senator Johnson’s office. Johnson, Chairman of the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, will host the January meeting in Washington, DC and will invite the other members of the South Dakota Congressional delegation to participate.

“I spoke with Secretary Shinseki today and emphasized how important it is that he meet with the Save the VA representatives. He agreed to my request and I am looking forward to the discussion,” said Johnson. “This meeting will ensure that Secretary Shinseki hears directly from our veterans and area communities.”

The Save the VA committee released its own response to the past week’s happening on Friday afternoon.

“The Save the VA Committee sincerely appreciates the efforts of Senator Tim Johnson, Senator John Thune and Representative Kristi Noem in their response to the letters from Secretary of the VA, Eric Shinseki. We stand behind Rep. Noem’s statement that, ‘The secretary’s response is not good enough!’ And we are in agreement with Senator Thune in our disappointment with the Secretary’s original response.

“We wish to thank Senator Tim Johnson for arranging a meeting in Washington with the Secretary.

“Our eventual goal is to persuade Secretary Shinseki to meet with the veterans face to face in Hot Springs so our American heroes can voice their concerns personally. A meeting in Washington is viewed by the Save the VA Committee as only the beginning of the process, not the final step.”

The Save the VA Committee also questioned why the Wyoming and Nebraska delegations have not been included in the invitation. The release recognizes that many rural veterans from these states are served by the Hot Springs VA and that closing the medical center will have severe impact on their access to quality care.

“We look forward to working with our congressional delegation to bring out the truth about the impact of the VA’s proposal. What Our Veterans Earned, We Deliver.”

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/secretary-shinseki-answers-delegation/article_5c47cec6-4dea-11e2-a84b-0019bb2963f4.html

In Our View

December 24, 2012 11:45 pm

The news release last Wednesday that stated Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki refused to meet face-to-face with either our Congressional delegation or representatives of the Save the VA group, further strengthened the notion that he is merely going through the motions on the future of the Hot Springs VA.

His refusal to see first-hand the Hot Springs VA facility and instead have the Save the VA group come to Washington to meet with an Under Secretary in his department was even more discouraging – especially considering that the Under Secretary with whom the Save the VA contingent was to meet was Dr. Robert Petzel.

Numerous people, past and present, at the VA in Hot Springs point to Dr. Petzel as the person who got the ball rolling on the erosion of services here in Hot Springs, while he was the director of VISN 23. He put those plans in motion, according to many, with help from Peter Henry, then-director of the Black Hills Health Care System.

So it was refreshing to see Sect. Shinseki relent on Friday, at the request of Senator Tim Johnson, and agree to meet with the Save the VA contingent himself. That meeting will take place in Washington, D.C., however, not Hot Springs as requested by the congressional delegation in October.

It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to see Dr. Petzel meeting with the Save the VA and providing anything other than a subjective opinion to Secretary Shinseki, so having the opportunity to meet directly with the Secretary of Veterans Affairs is a big score for the Save the VA effort, even though it has to take place in Washington, instead of Hot Springs.

Having a meeting with the Secretary, with members of the South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming Congressional delegates present for support could be promising for the Hot Springs VA.

'In Our View' is written by the Hot Springs Star editorial board, including Publisher Brett Nachtigall, Editor Curt Nettinga and Production Manager Sheryl Grimes.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/in-our-view/article_0d7f9076-4dea-11e2-8536-0019bb2963f4.html



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OURS

EDITORIAL: VA's behavior shameful

December 26, 2012 7:30 am • [Journal editorial board](#)

Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki at last has agreed to meet with the Save the VA Committee but not in Hot Springs. The group was formed after the Black Hills VA Health Care System announced one year ago that it was pulling most of its services out of Hot Springs. Save the VA wanted Shinseki to come to Hot Springs and see for himself the VA facilities there and to hear their proposal for a PTSD treatment center.

We hope the VA secretary will listen to the Save the VA proposal, but the behavior of the VA since its announced reorganization doesn't inspire confidence that Shinseki is sincere.

Why would we doubt the VA secretary sincerity?

Let us count the ways:

- When the Black Hills VA announced its reorganization plan in December 2011, details were sketchy and public meetings often left questioners unsatisfied.
- The VA's reorganization plan was justified as a way to better deliver health care to veterans, but the VA had not done a cost-benefit analysis.
- Sen. John Thune and Rep. Kristi Noem wrote to Shinseki in January asking for additional details on VA proposal. The VA's post-decision analysis was completed six months later in June.
- Steve DiStasio, director of VA Black Hills Health Care System, said he welcomed a discussion of alternatives to their proposal, and that other ideas may be incorporated into the final plan. "I want to have a dialogue with whomever is coming forth with alternative proposals," DiStasio said. On June 30, Save the VA unveiled its proposal to create a post-traumatic stress disorder treatment center and expand outpatient clinic services at the existing VA facilities.
- Despite DiStasio's promise to consider alternative proposals, at a Sept. 10 meeting between Black Hills VA officials and Save the VA, the Hot Springs group was told that the VA could not negotiate on its plan.
- In October, Sen. Tim Johnson, Thune, Noem and Congress members from Wyoming and Nebraska wrote to Shinseki, asking him to visit Hot Springs and meet with the local community.

- Last week, three months after the meeting request, the VA said the Save the VA group could travel to Washington, D.C., and meet with a VA undersecretary, not Shinseki.

It is not unreasonable to note that Sen. Johnson prevailed on Shinseki to meet with the Save the VA group in Washington because he serves on the Senate Appropriations Committee and could influence VA funding.

We are encouraged that Shinseki has agreed to meet with the Save the VA Committee and hear their proposal for a PTSD center at Hot Springs.

However, the VA's behavior during the past 12 months has been shameful.

Today's topic

THE ISSUE: VA Secretary Eric Shinseki agrees to meet with Save the VA Committee in Washington, D.C.

OUR VIEW: VA's behavior toward Hot Springs group has been outrageous.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/editorial-va-s-behavior-shameful/article_22e45283-98aa-58f1-86ca-142efdd1219e.html