

Senator Thune not sure on Hot Springs VA closure

Posted: Feb 01, 2012 4:02 PM MST

Veterans and the Hot Springs community are in a fight to save a major part of the town; not unlike the two struggles Rapid City had to save nearby Ellsworth Air Force Base.

The problem is, the Veterans Administration has not released any detailed criteria they used to target its Hot Springs medical center; shifting to more of a partnership role with community health facilities.

The argument to keep Ellsworth was made point-by-point but with the medical center, no cost analysis was released. This makes mounting a challenge difficult. But ultimately, it could be a blessing if Congress gets into the act.

Senator John Thune says he wants to see the data the VA used to justify closing the medical center in Hot Springs and moving a lot of the healthcare services to Rapid City. Without that data, he doubts Congress will approve the plan.

"We're going to continue to hope we get answers to these questions and until we do... I don't have any expectation that this thing is going to proceed," Thune explained.

Saturday, Representative Kristi Noem has a town hall meeting in Hot Springs. It is from 9 to 10 a.m. at the American Legion Post.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/16654927/senator-thune-not-sure-on-hot-springs-va-closure>



Noem skeptical about plan to organize VA healthcare system

February 02, 2012 11:55 am • Journal staff

South Dakota Rep. Kristi Noem said Thursday that she still has some hard questions about the plan to reorganize the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs health care system in the Black Hills.

The controversial restructuring plan announced in December will be the subject of a public town-hall meeting with Noem at 9 a.m. Saturday at the American Legion Post 71 in Hot Springs.

But Noem said Thursday during a telephone conference call with reporters that she is still a long way from embracing the VA plan.

"I'm pretty skeptical about the plan we're heard about," she said. "The VA has yet to make an argument as to how this helps veterans get better care. And that is certainly my top priority."

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/noem-skeptical-about-plan-to-organize-va-healthcare-system/article_ce3c80ec-4dcf-11e1-ac41-0019bb2963f4.html

Hot Springs VA closure is still far from reality

Posted: Feb 02, 2012 6:16 PM MST

By Taisha Walker - email

The proposed closure of the veteran's administration hospital is a hot topic in Hot Springs. In December, The Veterans Administration proposed it would move its Hot Springs Medical Center to Rapid City, in an effort to provide better care.

"I don't know if it would be a benefit to anybody," said Hot Springs Mayor Don DeVries. "It's certainly not a benefit to the veterans."

But community members have turned their negative issue into a positive campaign.

"There's young people, old people, veterans, non-veterans, everybody's working together," Scott Haden, Executive Director of the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce. "We're getting the word out and we want people to know that our VA takes care of the veterans and we think it should stay here."

Fourteen committees have formed the *Save the VA Campaign*. It's hard for anyone to drive through town without seeing one of the signs.

"Isn't that the heart of America when people come together and have an advocacy for a question or concern or idea?" asked Stephen DiStasio, Director of the VA Black Hills Health Center. He says he applauds the community's campaign efforts.

But the town's concern has shifted to the rumored closure of the medical center's ear, nose and throat clinic.

"After it came out that it was going to close they said no, there's a doctor that's been on vacation," the Mayor said.

But with no backup in place, the town's main focus is to keep and expand the VA Center, starting with a counter proposal.

U.S. Representative Kristi Noem of South Dakota will host a town hall meeting on Saturday to address VA health care issues.

The meeting will take place at the American Legion in Hot Springs starting at 9 A.M.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/16665949/hot-springs-va-closure-is-still-far-from-reality>

VA restructuring still evolving

February 04, 2012 8:30 am • Kevin Woster Journal staff

The director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System said that public input on the proposed restructuring of the system is helping to refine the plan.

Steve DiStasio said he continues to meet with groups representing veterans and communities involved in VA health care, as well as others interested in VA health issues. He said the process that began in December could continue for weeks or months.

"I'll go for as long as the process takes," DiStasio said Thursday.

People are voicing their opposition to the plan but also making suggestions, some of which could be incorporated into the final restructuring plan, DiStasio said.

"I think there's an opportunity to do some things that weren't in that original proposal," he said. "There are already people coming in and saying, 'Have you thought of this?' or 'What about that?'"

DiStasio said he and other VA officials are listening and looking for ways to improve a restructuring proposal that sparked controversy when it was announced in December. But that doesn't mean substantial change won't be coming to the VA system in the Black Hills.

"Something's got to change," DiStasio said. "We cannot continue to operate as we are right now."

The original proposal calls for closing most of the sprawling VA complex in Hot Springs but maintaining a VA out-patient clinic there and developing partnerships for in-patient care with the Fall River Health Services there and with health-care providers in other towns. VA services and facilities also would be expanded in Rapid City and at Fort Meade near Sturgis.

DiStasio insists that the intent is to provide better, more accessible care for veterans throughout a primary service area that stretches from North Dakota south to Scottsbluff, Neb., west to Newcastle, Wyo., and east to the Missouri River region.

He hopes the plan can be completed by the end of the year.

Contact Kevin Woster at 394-8413 or kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/va-restructuring-still-evolving/article_d93f2486-4eec-11e1-8132-0019bb2963f4.html.

Noem addresses Hot Springs VA concerns

Posted: Feb 04, 2012 11:21 PM MST

By Kristen Tripodi - email

First it was Senator Thune and now South Dakota's lone U.S. House Representative stops in KOTA Territory to talk with veterans about the Hot Springs VA.

People gathered today in Hot Springs for a town hall meeting hosted by Kristi Noem.

The Veteran's Administration has proposed closing the town's VA clinic and moving some services and jobs to Rapid City or Fort Meade.

Noem says she heard moving testimony, including veterans' personal stories of the care they've received at the hot springs VA.

But she says she wants to see a cost analysis from the VA before making any decisions.

"They've been caring for these veterans for decades. The entire town has wrapped their arms around them. But it also impacts their businesses, impacts their schools. They bring people in from all over the country and they love them, they heal them and then they send them back to be people in their own communities to be better because of the care they've given them," says Representative Noem.

Representative Noem says she's working with Senator Thune and Johnson, along with Nebraska Representative Adrian Smith.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/16679277/noem-addresses-hot-springs-va-concerns>

Mary Goulet

February 06, 2012 11:31 am

To the Editor:

We Are One Voice

We are faxing, e-mailing, phoning, writing, carrying petitions, making posters, attending meetings and fundraising.

We are energized, concerned, hopeful and undivided. We are going to march together toward our goal. We are the veterans, the Native Americans, the young, the old, the business and community leaders and ordinary citizens - crossing political, religious, ethnic and county and state boundaries.

We are united in a common cause that is for the good of all - our veterans and the surrounding communities in North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Montana and Wyoming.

There are no lines in our common fight to keep our VA in Hot Springs, away from the clamor and enticements of the larger cities. Veterans in treatment for PTSD and substance abuse deserve the best VA in the most restorative surroundings. They fought for our country during the prime and most vulnerable time of their lives. Now our country must protect their mental and physical health during their fragile time of healing and for the rest of their lifetimes.

"If we send them, we must mend them." From Tears of a Warrior, By Janet Seahorn, PHD.

Mary Goulet

Hot Springs

http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/opinion/mary-goulet/article_2fed1c92-50f1-11e1-ab0b-001871e3ce6c.html

KENT: If you dismantle it, they will go

February 09, 2012 6:30 am • Jim Kent Journal columnist

In these times of political and cultural polarization, it's not often that you can get several hundred people of different stripes gathered together in the same place with one goal in mind.

But that's exactly what happened last Saturday as hundreds converged on the Hot Springs American Legion Hall — Native Americans and non-Native, veterans and non-veterans, old and young alike. Their long line was, literally, out the front door.

The burgeoning crowd had come to hear South Dakota Congresswoman Kristi Noem offer comments and hear testimony on the local Veterans Administration plan to restructure services in its Black Hills Health Care System.

I say "local" because Oglala Sioux tribal president John Yellow Bird Steele indicated that the VA hierarchy in Washington, D.C., has a completely different view of what's taking place here in South Dakota.

According to Steele, his recent visit to the nation's capital left the Vietnam vet with more questions than answers. While talking to some "pretty high up officials in the VA opposing this plan," Steele was advised, "John, nothing's going to happen."

Steele informed his VA connections that "these past years they've been cutting back on services. They've been doing it."

Of course, this exchange leads directly to the question that has been asked by many since area director Steve DiStasio unveiled his "proposed" plan for the future of the VA Black Hills Health Care System last December: Will the comments, concerns and information submitted by folks on the ground actually make their way to (and be seen by) the VA secretary? The results of Steele's visit to D.C. certainly would give one reason to pause.

Still, there's really no mystery to this when one realizes just how far back changes to the Black Hills Health Care System have been the "plan" (there's that word again). Over and over again, I've heard from veterans and former Hot Springs VA employees about the slow, gradual, yet steady and purposeful 16-year reduction of services at the facility once considered among the finest VA sites in the nation.

One might consider depleting services an odd way to reward one of your best health care locations. I do.

What's actually going on behind the scenes in this apparent local VA manipulation of care, service and numbers has yet to become apparent. But suffice to say, that — on the surface — the objective of the VA Black Hills Health Care System's administration seems to be a long-standing inversion of the "Field of Dreams" mantra: in this case, "If you dismantle it, they will go."

And dismantle services they have, thereby creating an illusion that veterans now choose to go to other locations for care, rather than the reality, that veterans now have to travel to obtain the services that the VA has relocated.

Case in point: My notification last week that a procedure I received at the Hot Springs campus three years ago now must be performed at Fort Meade.

That's odd, I thought, considering that I was advised during an interview last spring that the Hot Springs VA had been able to replace more than 90 percent of physicians who'd left their positions. Hmmm ...

As for Rep. Noem, I was impressed by her willingness to visit the town at the heart of the VA restructuring, listen to the voice of the people, and question a plan created by individuals who, in Noem's own words, "didn't do their homework."

When I was in Catholic school, the penalty for that was detention. Sadly, there's no Mother Superior assigned to "enlighten" DiStasio about his numbers.

Jim Kent lives in Hot Springs. Write to kentvfte@gwtc.net.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/kent-if-you-dismantle-it-they-will-go/article_a643d340-52a4-11e1-b414-001871e3ce6c.html?print=1

DiStasio, 'Work on veterans health care continues'

February 14, 2012 3:30 am • By Curt Nettinga

VA Director discusses progress, problems and dom location

HOT SPRINGS - More than two months have passed since then-acting Black Hills Health Care System director Steve DiStasio presented the proposal that would send shockwaves throughout the Hot Springs VA service area.

Since that time, DiStasio has had the 'acting' removed from his title and he said that there have been multiple town hall meetings, interviews and face-to-face discussions on the future of veterans' health care in western South Dakota, northwestern Nebraska, and eastern Wyoming and Montana.

DiStasio answered questions on a wide range of subjects recently in his Hot Springs office, with the overall message being that of working toward a solution to the problem of rural health care.

"Two months in we have spoken to between 2,600-2,700 individuals, received about 700 comment cards and another 50-60 letters and e-mails," DiStasio said. "There has been a wide range of input; some people want to see more local care, while here in Hot Springs, people are concerned and don't think its (the proposal) a good idea at all."

He stated that having continuing communication is something to which he is looking forward, particularly if new ideas are presented and potential partnerships to improve health care can be examined.

An idea raised at an earlier meeting with the Hot Springs City Council was to make Hot Springs a national destination for PTSD patients. DiStasio said that question has come up at other forums.

"One person asked about expanding the PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) program to include non-veterans," DiStasio said. "The VA is a leader in PTSD treatment and this would provide access for someone needing it, in addition to providing more patients to continue the program."

"But how would having a nationwide program that has 200-300 patients affect similar programs across the country?"he asked.

"My feedback at that time is that a program such as that was not feasible. What would the response be from the veterans, some of whom may be thousands of miles from their home? My sense is that at that level - 200-300 patients - it wouldn't be feasible."

On the subject of the domiciliary, DiStasio said that in the proposal he was in support of building a dom in Rapid City.

"That is based on corollary reasons; jobs, education, transportation and such," he said. "I am committed to us needing a new building. At 100 years of age, our current building has exceeded its life expectancy, if you will."

DiStasio said that the way the program's treatment is delivered is affecting the current dom as well. He said he sees a time where two to four veterans will share a townhouse-type setting, sharing living and kitchen areas, and gaining life skills while receiving treatment.

"I am not adverse to hearing a proposal for something in Hot Springs at all," he said in response to a question. "I am, however, very interested in making sure that we do it well. Can we develop the mass, recruit and retain the best staff?"

He said that he would have to hear such a proposal and decide if it was workable before being able to support it.

He said that he is not surprised at the level of response seen thus far with the Save the VA Campaign and said that is "looking forward to seeing what the Save the VA Campaign Executive Committee comes forth with as a proposal."

"At the same time, I am disappointed that people on my staff have been verbally attacked and threatened," he said. "That we can do without, in the community and the VA."

He allowed that he had heard reports of VA employees expressing fear of retaliation if they spoke out in opposition. "I don't think there is anyone who can present a case where this has happened," DiStasio said. "Could employees be facing recrimination from their peers? It could be going on." He said that if he found any evidence that was actionable he would take that action.

"The attacks against people have to stop," he said. "I have spoken to the mayor and others. I can be the target, but making my people the target has to stop. Intelligent, fruitful dialog is the way we need to go."

DiStasio said that he would gladly answer questions and exchange ideas with any of the Save the VA Campaign committees that wished to do so. "I also hope that moving forward, we may have further dialog with the board at Fall River Hospital," he said. "After our initial meeting after the proposal announcement, we have not met with them. I understand through the media that they have concerns over capacity. Those are the things that need to be handled through conversation."

He said that he would be interested in discussing a program that has worked in other similar settings, in which VA employees would work in a hospital setting such as Fall River's, providing assistance with the capacity and capabilities of staff to meet VA guidelines.

On the subject of a requested extension to the time for the Save the VA Campaign to craft a counterproposal, DiStasio said he believed the issue had been raised in the letter from Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, along with Representative Kristi Noem that was sent to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki last month.

"I believe that the response to that question is coming," DiStasio said. "From the beginning we have always said that there was no line in the sand. But what happens if the timeline is extended? As I understand it, things here have come to a screeching halt. No business development and little construction, even small projects have been put on hold while this continues. What affect will taking longer have on the community?"

DiStasio met with the Fall River County Commissioners last week, as part of the normal meeting and said he is willing to meet with anyone to further discuss ideas raised by the VA proposal, including Save the VA Campaign committees.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/news/distasio-work-on-veterans-health-care-continues/article_a10c61ac-566a-11e1-b863-0019bb2963f4.html

Commission quizzes VA director

February 14, 2012 3:30 am • By Curt Nettinga

HOT SPRINGS - The Fall River County Commission and several audience members were able to ask questions of Black Hills Health Care System director Stephen DiStasio, as a portion of the the commission's regular Feb. 7 meeting.

DiStasio re-iterated that the proposed changes that are being discussed are not a "done deal," and said that he "welcomes dialog with any group or organization."

"Our primary concern is to provide quality care for our veterans," DiStasio said. "I am concerned with maintaining robust outpatient care, while seeing if more of the inpatient care can be addressed locally with other providers."

DiStasio said that with an average of only five inpatients at the Hot Springs facility, he was concerned that the level of care could be maintained.

Commissioner Anne Cassens said that her primary concern is the future of the Domiciliary. "You have professed to a preference of building a new dom in Rapid City," she said. "Can you tell me why that is preferred to having that facility here?"

DiStasio said that the main ideas were better access to jobs, transportation and to additional education. "The course of treatment offered in the dom is changing," He said that the overall name of the substance abuse and PTSD recover programs will fall under the Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program (RRTP).

"Well," responded Commissioner Deb Russell, "I don't buy the school and workforce. When it comes to education any more, all you really need is a computer. They can do that here, when they have their support staff around them. Utilize more technology."

Commissioner Joe Falkenburg said that he was most concerned with adding 50 miles one way to the travel of veterans. "That'll just be devastating," Falkenburg told DiStasio.

"I am struck by the constant thought that people will be traveling further," DiStasio said. "In the proposal, the same outpatient services will be offered here as are offered now." Cassens said she disagreed, as her father is now required to go to Fort Meade for treatment he previously received here, and Commissioner Joe Allen added that he too must travel to Fort Meade for treatment.

Audience member Susan Henderson said that she wanted to know how much the VA was spending on housing veterans in the Cornerstone Homeless Shelter in Rapid City. DiStasio said he didn't know but would find out. He said that the VA currently contracts for 55 beds at Cornerstone for veterans.

Commission chair Mike Ortner asked why it is believed that building new in Rapid City was preferred versus either remodeling the current Hot Springs facility or building new here.

"Rapid City has 10 times the temptations of Hot Springs," Ortner said.

DiStasio said that he would encourage the county and city to come up with a plan that may include building some two-to-four person townhouses for veterans, which the VA could lease for its veterans. "That is the type of in-home, living skill training that we are looking at," he said. "That would be an idea that we can look at. Right now, we aren't hearing of any better ideas or better way of proceeding."

Paul Nabholz, who chairs the Data Validation committee for the Save the VA Campaign chastised DiStasio for having no documentation to back up the proposal.

"When Wind Cave wanted to increase its sewer lagoon," Nabholz said to DiStasio, "it presented reams of data and three different ideas. There were things which could be researched. Where are your facts and figures? You say all you want to do is talk, but how can we have a dialog when we can't get facts and figures to discuss? It's driving me nuts! The proposal has nothing in it to show how it will benefit veterans at all!"

DiStasio said that historically that is how things were presented, a plan was offered and little input was taken.

"But give us your numbers," Nabholz reiterated. "The numbers you used to come up with your proposal. Maybe we can look at them from a local perspective and tell you 'Hey, you missed this.'"

DiStasio allowed "there is more than one way to skin a cat, but I am not sure which the best way is. At the end, I can't spend a dime unless I can show that the benefits of the adopted plan." DiStasio said that he has not had discussion with anyone for leasing land or buildings in Rapid City, or any purchase. He also said that when data is gathered and a plan is formulated that would be a window of opportunity of several months to examine the numbers in the plan.

"I sleep well at night," DiStasio said, "knowing that I am doing what is in their (the veterans) best interest."

Jim Johnson of Environ Services participated in the meeting via conference call, relating the results of air quality testing and a plan to address some issues.

Johnson said that test showed all levels within OSHA accepted guidelines, but did not that several of the courthouse employees had complained of some illness, ranging from cold-like symptoms to breathing difficulty. "Most of the problem," Johnson said, "is that there is inadequate ventilation throughout the building. Air is stagnant and doesn't move around much."

One of the problem areas is the attic of the courthouse. Environ Services offered a quote to clean and vacuum the attic for \$2,400, which was approved by the commission. Evidence of mouse

and bat presence was noted in the attic, which Johnson said could be adding to the air issues the courthouse staff is seeing.

In other action, the commission:

- Approved the settlement stipulation with Pine Hills Retirement Community for \$3.5 million is assessed value.
- Approved resolutions of support for the Fall River Gun Club's shooting range and for continued VA health care in Hot Springs.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/news/commission-quizzes-va-director/article_2e02a732-5662-11e1-85e4-0019bb2963f4.html

Virtual reality helps veterans with PTSD

Posted: Feb 20, 2012 4:27 PM MST

By PJ Randhawa, Reporter

Studies indicate, roughly 20% of soldiers who've been deployed in the past six years return with post traumatic stress disorder.

But now, as PJ Randhawa reports, a new technology at the Black Hills Veterans Administration hospital is providing a unique way for veterans to confront and conquer those traumatic memories.

John Cooke doesn't really remember the man he was before he left for war

"My personality was very happy, it's been a long time....since I've been that person," said John Cooke, an Air force veteran.

But eight years in the air force and two deployments later, John clearly remembers the daily terrors of war.

"I saw detainees kill each other, it was just very violent. My commander got hurt. They blew up his vehicle...with a molotov cocktail, they ripped his face off with a rock as well. A lot of violence, a lot of stuff as a young airman I had no idea I would see," said Cooke.

Long after leaving the battlefield, John and other veterans often experience the lingering effects of war.

"I didn't notice it when I first got home...my wife would tell me I was screaming in the middle of the night," said Derrek Wilson, an army veteran.

"Due to medical technology and treatment, many veterans are surviving what would've been fatal injuries in the past. Also increases the instance of PTSD for veterans," said Alyce Clauson, PTSD coordinator for the Hot Springs VA.

And now ... A new therapy offers veterans the chance to confront their anxieties face to face.

"Virtual reality equipment gives them a chance to work ... their memory. So instead of being on stage, you can move back from the event and get more of an audience view. Takes some of the sting and pain out of it," said Clauson.

By bringing veterans back into familiar wartime environments, therapists are able to monitor physical reactions and identify the triggers.

"It's tailor made to the experience of Iraqi and afghan veterans. It has the same kinds of reminders or triggers," said Dr. John Dennig, staff psychologist.

"The hospital brings me back....kinda graphic. Gun fire, screams, the Arabic music is also a trigger," said Cooke as he explores a virtual reality treatment set in Afghanistan.

"It works because it elevates anxiety to a point where it's still manageable. Still somewhat safe, but also stressed. The mind assimilates they're in a safe environment, whereas before they were not in a safe environment," said Dr. Dennig.

Dr. Dennig says the success rate of the virtual reality treatment has been relatively high. For veteran John Cooke, it presents an opportunity to find something in himself, he's long thought to be lost.

"I have a will to get better. Sometimes it's hard to see it. I believe someday I will be a happy guy running through a meadow, that would be something I would desire to do," said Cooke.

The virtual reality post traumatic stress disorder therapy will be available by the black hills veterans' administration starting May 1st.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/16976774/virtual-reality-helps-veterans-with-ptsd>

Guest Editorial: Despite closures, we cared for our vets and did it well

February 21, 2012 3:30 am • Guest Editorial By Wendy Brehe

I am an RN, who had the honor of providing care for our veterans at the VA hospital here in Hot Springs for 13 years. I started as a fee-basis RN, working on floors 2 South, 1 East and 1 North (2S, 1E and 1N), as well as the Intensive Care Unit and the recovery room.

I hired full time into ICU in 2000. During the time I was employed at the VA, 2S, which included med-surg., and psych.-detox services closed. Then 1N, the long-term care hospice wing closed. Then ICU closed and I transferred into the surgery department.

In my years as a surgical nurse at HSVA, the surgery department underwent a transition into an ambulatory surgery/outpatient department. We may have been "just" an ambulatory surgery department, but we provided a much-needed service to our veterans.

We performed general surgeries with lesion clinics, eye surgeries, urology, orthopedic and endoscopy services. We had three operating rooms and a large procedure room available for our use. Our department was required to maintain joint commission accreditation, which is required of all VA facilities and is quite strict. Our nursing staff was required to be experience in critical care and/or surgery areas, with a minimum of two years nursing experience. We were also expected to maintain our skill levels, in order to provide optimum outcomes for our veterans when they came to us for surgeries.

I believe that we were able to continue to provide a high standard of care to our veterans, even with our downsizing, because of the strict guidelines the joint commission required us to follow. The veterans who came to us always voiced positive comments about the quality of care they received at our VA, and returned to us when they needed future procedures.

There is a certain standard of care provided at VA facilities nationwide that must be maintained for our veterans, wherever they receive their care. VA hospitals have been at the forefront of innovative programs, such as the Bar Code Medication Administration, which was implemented in order to provide the most accurate system of medication administration. Joint commission sets the standards of care high, which is as it should be for our honored veterans.

Our surgery department was small, but high in quality and we greatly enjoyed caring for our veterans. The VA provided top-of-the-line equipment for use in our operating rooms and to monitor patients during and after their surgeries. Our nursing staff was required to be educated and become proficient in the use of this equipment, in order to ably assist our surgeons and urologist - at all times while being closely monitored by Joint Commission.

Our surgical patients at times came from four to six hours away; from eastern Wyoming, Nebraska and the Reservation. They already traveled long distances to come to Hot Springs for their surgical procedures; how much further can we expect them to travel? And at what cost?

Our veterans have taken care of us, now we must continue to care for them. We love this VA hospital in Hot Springs. It has undergone frequent remodeling projects over the years, while still preserving its history.

We need to fight to keep our Hot Springs VA Hospital open and able to provide the services to our veterans what we have in years past - whether it's surgical, medical, urgent care, domiciliary care or clinical care.

Our veterans fought for us, now we must stand together and fight for them.

Wendy Brehe is a former RN who worked in several areas of the Hot Springs VA during her 13 year career at the facility.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/guest-editorial-despite-closures-we-cared-for-our-vets-and/article_9ca83f9e-5be4-11e1-b9ab-0019bb2963f4.html#ixzz1n470sVO4

Letter to the Editor: Catherine Ratliff

February 21, 2012 3:30 am

To the Editor:

Last week I keyboarded letters in the Save the VA letter-writing campaign. Some writers had worked at the VA, others had received services or had family members who received services at the VA. Many had both kinds of experiences.

The writers told their stories, compared our VA and Domiciliary to other VAs: the Hot Springs VA staff, "from the janitors to the doctors," were uniformly reported to be the most respectful, caring and dedicated, most professional, least bureaucratic, and most healing. Their letters told different stories, but they converged on this point: the total Hot Springs experience - the VA and community - was more conducive to healing than any place they had been.

The letter-writers were sincere; even passionate. But how to understand such praise, particularly in view of the Hot Springs VA's diminishing resources for 20 years?

The distilled message, which I believe to be true, is a study in sociology and spirit. Hot Springs, a small, rural community, has a 100-year relationship with veterans. Over five generations, a unique "culture of place" has developed, deeply rooted in service to veterans. New staff is immersed in the culture of place and "introject" the attitudes and values of the culture. The result cannot be well explained to bureaucrats, but it works.

The VA has been the heart of this community. The community has the VA in its heart. It's a "veterans' town" and no one should try to change it; that's the message of the community to decision makers.

Catherine Ratliff

Hot Springs

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/letter-to-the-editor-catherine-ratliff/article_b2d44afc-5be3-11e1-a61b-0019bb2963f4.html

One-time homeless veteran fears impact of VA plans



February 21, 2012 3:30 am • By Mary Goulet Special to the Hot Springs Star

After repeated failed attempts at Denver VA, Henry Amador found sobriety and peace in Hot Springs

HOT SPRINGS - Henry Amador had hit rock bottom. He was addicted to drugs, homeless, and living under a bridge in Denver. His isolation was a sharp departure from his life as a child. He had been brought up by Mexican immigrant grandparents who, by example, instilled in Henry a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility. He had enlisted in the Navy at the age of 17, partly to make a living, and also with a sense of loyalty to the country that had taken in his grandparents and adopted them as Americans.

After the service Henry made a good life for himself working construction in Denver, and, on occasion, helping out some of his siblings. At the age of 35 he was introduced to drugs, and his life spiraled downward with the loss of relationships, social life and, eventually, his work. One day, having reached the lowest of lows, he made the decision to get back his life, and after being directed to the Denver VA by another homeless man, he began his long struggle toward sobriety.

Veterans who apply for the homeless program at the Denver VA live in a homeless shelter in an unsavory part of town. Henry says that the VA paid the shelters \$300 each night to house a veteran. Henry passed winos and dealers on his way to catch the bus to take his classes at the VA, and later to do his work release programs. He was kicked out of the treatment program five times. Usually veterans cannot return after the third failure, but because he had such a remarkable work record, the counselors gave him two more chances. Finally, as a last resort, they deported him to Hot Springs, SD. They told him they could no longer help him, but that he might have a better chance in the quiet of a small town. They said he needed seclusion to achieve sobriety.

Amador recalls not wanting to go to a little town in the middle of nowhere, but, he knew he had reached the bottom; he wanted to die, was scared to live wrong, and felt that he was already dead. He was determined to get his life back so he decided to accept their offer.

The VA in Hot Springs had a two month waiting period, so he returned to the Salvation Army to wait for his journey to "Nowhere," South Dakota.

On the bus ride into Hot Springs, he said he recalled beginning to change his mind.

As they made the right turn into town off of the highway, he said, "Wow, this is sweet!" He fell in love with the scenery, but the icing on the cake was the sight of the small sign as they drove into town, "Hot Springs, The Veterans Town." Any hesitation about the area was washed away when he entered the Dom. He loved the beautiful, peaceful grounds that surrounded the hospital - he was at home.

Amador said the counselors in Hot Springs were caring and took time with him. He followed the program and performed his jobs with the enthusiasm he had always shown for work. He relapsed once, and accepted their offer to restart the program and get a job in the community.

He found a job as a fencer, working with a boss he respects, another veteran who served in Vietnam. He earns good money, has understanding from a fellow veteran, established a healthy relationship with a non-using woman, and lives with her and their dog in a trailer just outside of town.

Amador said he is worried about the Hot Springs VA Dom moving to Rapid. He said he fears it will become like the one in Denver where the veterans in the treatment program live in shelters in disquieting environments. If they eventually have to go to regular hospitals for their medical care in Rapid City, there will never be the sense of comradeship that veterans feel when they enter a VA Hospital. They will not feel special for having served this country. The veterans showed their respect to our country by their service, and now the government is not showing their respect in return by taking away the comfortable and loving surroundings of a very special VA in a supportive and peaceful town.

He said he loves the Dom and the town of Hot Springs. He believes that for many years the whole town has grown up respecting the veteran and it is bred into this community to accept them as one of their own.

Amador said he wants to remain here where people understand, and where he can visit the guys in the Dom and be an inspiration to them as someone who has made it after numerous setbacks. He wants his life back and, for now, he has found that life in Hot Springs, South Dakota, the Veterans Town.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/one-time-homeless-veteran-fears-impact-of-va-plans/article_e6861864-5bdc-11e1-a26d-0019bb2963f4.html

Possible erosion of VA services concerns veterans

February 21, 2012 12:12 pm • By GEORGE LEDBETTER Record Editor

Any action by the Veteran's Administration to close the VA hospital in Hot Springs South Dakota won't take place any time soon, a representative of Nebraska Senator Mike Johanns assured a group of veterans and spouses in Chadron Tuesday afternoon, Feb. 14.

But Senator Johanns is concerned about the possibility that the type of medical services offered at Hot Springs could be gradually reduced in the meantime, as a way to justify the eventual phasing out of the facility, Johann's military affairs director Roger Lembke said at a meeting at the Chadron American Legion building.

"The biggest problem we see now is the slow erosion of care, even though the time frame of a new facility may be long," said Lembke, the former head of the Nebraska National Guard. "We see that as primary for Nebraskans-that they (the VA) maintain a level of care."

The VA Black Hills Health Care System announced in December a five-year plan that would gradually phase out use of the Hot Springs hospital and associated domiciliary, while increasing the use of contract services with community hospitals in the region. Many of the services currently offered in Hot Springs would be shifted to Rapid City, S.D., or the Ft. Meade VA center near Sturgis, S.D.

Some services, including dialysis would continue to be provided at an outpatient clinic in Hot Springs, but more treatment options would be offered through non VA hospitals-as is already done in Gordon and some other Nebraska communities.

The plan has drawn considerable opposition from veterans in northwest Nebraska, who have cited the quality of care they receive at Hot Springs, and the hardship of having to travel farther for services.

Lembke said those issues have been raised frequently at other meetings he has conducted with western Nebraska veterans. "The recurring comments, from the beginning, has been the friendliness of care in Hot Springs," he said. "I don't get the same comments from eastern Nebraska about going to Omaha (VA)."

Some veterans have also been wary of the idea of using local hospitals, according to Lembke. "Some feedback we have gotten is that veterans prefer going to Hot Springs as opposed to the local hospitals," he said.

That prompted a number of audience comments about the advantages of VA hospital care. "A lot of us suffer from similar ailments. By going to the VA we don't have to explain how those ailments came about," said one man.

"The VA doctors are on the same level as us," said Phillip Biernacki.

Others shared with Lembke stories of reductions in care provided at the Hot Springs facility. A woman said that her husband, who has been treated at Hot Springs for more than 40 years, recently had to go to Fort Meade for a 15 minute appointment to adjust his dentures.

Biernacki said within the last year he has had to go to Fort Meade for adjustments to his knee braces, a service that previously was performed at Hot Springs.

That trend that worries veterans, because it could end with closing of the Hot Springs facility, said Stacey Swinney of Chadron, "I'm afraid they will have a gradual eroding of our services," he said. "The people proposing this in five to seven years will be gone and we will be left with the ruins."

Senator Johanns doesn't oppose progress in medical treatment, and understands the difficulties in upgrading old buildings, which are among the justifications that VA Black Hills has given for its plan to phase out the Hot Springs center, Lembke noted.

And there may be advantages to providing medical care for veterans in local hospitals rather than traveling to a distant VA center, said Lembke. "We hope people warm up to that. There is no sense to have to drive to get those services."

But in its planning the VA needs to involve affected veterans and their communities," so it does make some sense," he added.

The sentiments of the 35 to 40 people attending the meeting were quite opposed to the plan to close the Hot Springs center, however. Asked to raise their hand if they supported closing the facility, no one in the audience responded. The option of leaving the facility as it is garnered a significant majority of the audience's support, however and presented with the option of either leaving the facility intact or improving it, everyone present raised a hand in assent.

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/chadron/possible-erosion-of-va-services-concerns-veterans/article_c73130c2-5cc0-11e1-9cf6-001871e3ce6c.html

Veteran works to prevent proposed Hot Springs VA closure by speaking out, painting signs

Posted: Feb 21, 2012 10:43 PM MST

It's an easy to spot message, standing out in red, white, and blue on a garage along the highway south of Hot Springs. But the veteran responsible for painting the save the VA sign hasn't had it so easy.

"I fell into hard times and I started using. I started drinking first and after drinking it went into smoking, then crack cocaine," Henry Amador said.

Amador, who enlisted at age 17 in search of a better life, found himself in Denver fighting for life 18 years later.

"I was out on the streets for two years and that's when I met another veteran that was an addict and an alcoholic," Amador said.

The veteran told Amador about the services provided by the local VA.

"The next day I went to the VA and filled out my application," Amador said. "Under 'address' I said, '(under) the bridge.'"

But staying clean surrounded by the big city's temptations proved to be a challenge.

"No matter how much I tried to avoid it, and I did try, it was always there," Amador said.

In the following months, Amador would be kicked out of the program five times.

"I needed help," Amador said.

VA counselors left him with one last option: a move to Hot Springs, South Dakota.

"I googled it on the computer and I said, 'No way ... no,'" Amador said.

He gave it a shot anyway and as the bus pulled into town, he saw a sign that gave him hope.

"That's what got me, I said 'This is veteran town?' No way!" Amador said.

Amador said it only got better when he arrived at the Dom and his life began to turn around.

Former social worker, Karen Meston says Henry is not alone in his miraculous recovery.

"What Henry has to say about his experience is very similar to what I've heard from other veterans," Meston said. "What they say is: 'It worked for me here because I didn't have as many temptations. It was quieter.'"

In the serene, rural setting of Hot Springs, Amador found peace.

"You walk down these streets and the people will look at you and say, 'Hey, how's it goin'!" Amador said. "They know you're not from here, but they know why you're here and they treat you like a human being."

One of those people, another veteran who served in Vietnam, gave him a job as a fencer.

"It makes me feel good to be part of that recovery process for him," said Marc Lamphere, Amador's Construction Supervisor.

But Amador says the threat of a VA closure has him speaking out and creating more signs to make sure veterans have a similar opportunity: to have another chance at life.

"This is for the veterans who needs this place," Amador said. '(It's for) the ones after me and ones who have been here before me.'

Hot Springs is preparing to host a "Veterans Welcome Home Ride" an effort by local veterans to halt the proposed closure of the VA clinic. The procession will include delegations from Lakota Nation Reservations is scheduled for this Saturday afternoon from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. Participants will line-up at the Dairy Queen with the tail end stretching over Garden Street back to the American Legion Post 71.

There is a program scheduled to begin at 9 a.m. when participants can gather at the American Legion parking lot in Hot Springs.

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/16988110/once-homeless-veteran-rehabilitated-at-the-hot-springs-va-helps-to-prevent-a-proposed-closure-with-painted-signs>

VA Health Care leaders make stop in Newcastle during tour of KOTA Territory

Posted: Feb 24, 2012 5:32 PM MST

Black Hills Health Care System Department of Veterans Affairs Director Stephen DiStasio and other V-A healthcare leaders have been holding public forums since December to discuss the details of possible changes to a V-A clinic in Hot Springs, South Dakota, and to receive feedback from veterans.

In Newcastle, Wyoming today, DiStasio explained to vets his detailed plan for the proposed changes. The plan includes buying more care locally so veterans don't have to travel as far, and building a new Residential Rehabilitation Treatment Program facility in Rapid City.

"They should know that the meetings are going to continue. We want to hear the voice of the vet. We particularly want their input on better ideas, suggestions, and we certainly want to hear about their concerns," DiStasio said.

"Really their not going to change Hot Springs that much for the regular patient who goes over there for his annual physical, so I think it was really good in that respect," said veteran Bryan Pownall of Rozet, Wyoming.

DiStasio says no changes have been finalized yet, and he will continue meeting with vets and listening to their feedback to better serve their healthcare needs.

For more details on the proposal go to: www.blackhills.va.gov/VABlackHillsFuture/

<http://www.kotatv.com/story/17014860/va-health-care-leaders-make-stop-in-newcastle-during-tour-of-kota-territory>

Veterans Hosting Ride To Halt Closure Of VA Clinic

by Associated Press

February 25, 2012 3:21 PM

Some veterans in Hot Springs are hosting a veterans welcome home ride Saturday as part of an effort to halt the proposed closure of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs clinic.

The parade procession from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. will include delegations from several Native American tribes.

A program in the American Legion parking lot is scheduled to begin at 9 a.m.

Veteran Henry Amador says the threat of the VA closure has him speaking out and creating signs to make sure veterans have a similar opportunity to have another chance at life.

He says the VA helped him overcome drug and alcohol addiction and find a new life in South Dakota's Black Hills.

http://www.kdlt.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=15649&Itemid=57

Hundreds protest proposed changes to Hot Springs VA Hospital

Saturday, 25 February 2012 15:25

Following the December announcement of proposed changes to the Veterans Administration hospital in Hot Springs supporters from all across the country converged on the Southern Hills town to show their support for keeping the V-A just the way it is.

The Hot Springs V-A hospital is the city's largest employer and the proposed changes would relocate staff and services outside to different locations scattered across the Black Hills. That's why hundreds joined together this afternoon to fight the V-A's decision to do so.

J. David Cox, of the American Federation of Government Employees says, "Every veteran wants VA healthcare at their fingertips, readily available and the best quality of care, and nationwide, veterans are rallying to this call in Hot Springs as they've done in Salisbury, North Carolina, Walla-Walla, Washington and other sites around the country."

J. David Cox has spent his life working for the VA and now represents a union for VA healthcare system employees nationwide. He flew out from Washington DC to stand shoulder to shoulder with hundred of other veterans and community members to protest changes to the Southern Hills hospital. He didn't mince words when describing the different needs in care between veterans and civilians.

Cox says, "The care of a veteran is very unique healthcare. Only in veterans do you have people who are injured by bombs and various things. When you see someone that doesn't have 3 of their extremities, you know that person is a veteran."

Native American leaders also joined the stand Saturday against the changes to services in Hot Springs. The Pine Ridge VA says there are more than 4 thousand vets on the reservation and they would have much to lose with the relocation of staff and services.

Pine Ridge VA President Bryan Brewer says, "For us, it's the closest we have for medical treatment. They want to move it to Ft. Meade and Rapid City and that would be a real hardship to vets on Pine Ridge trying to get up there, so we're really concerned about keeping this open."

Both Brewer and Cox agree Saturday's show of support was more than they could have ever hoped for.

Cox says, "This is the most tremendous community support I have ever seen in my life for a VA medical center. I believe everyone, not just in Hot Springs, but everybody in the state of South Dakota has turned out today, and I would send the word to every elected official whether they're a democrat or a republican; if they're not supporting veterans, I believe the people of South Dakota will certainly take that to the polls this fall."

Brendyn Medina

<http://www.blackhillsfox.com/2012/02/25/Hundreds-protest-proposed-changes-to-Hot-Springs-VA-Hospital>

More than 1,000 participate in 'Welcome Home Veterans' march Saturday

February 26, 2012 10:00 am • Curt Nettinga Hot Springs Star

HOT SPRINGS — With the brightly colored posters, numerous flags and hundreds of people along the streets, Saturday's "Welcome Home Veterans" parade could have been the same as any other parade in any South Dakota town.

At the heart of the matter, however, was something far more serious -- halting the proposed closing of the Hot Springs VA Medical facility.

More than 1,000 veterans, family members and supporters took to the streets of Hot Springs, forming a throng of people – dozens of Native Americans on horseback, hundreds more on foot – who marched from the Hot Springs American Legion to the VA Black Hills Health Care System campus.

The walk was a protest over the proposed elimination of the VA Medical Center in Hot Springs and the moving of the domiciliary -- for post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse treatment -- to Rapid City. BHHCS director Stephen DiStasio presented the proposed changes in December.

Efforts in Hot Springs have continued since DiStasio's presentation, forming committees and gathering information, to be presented as a counterproposal in the near future.

On Saturday, after the trek through town and a wreath-laying ceremony at the National Cemetery on the VA grounds, the event moved to the front lawn of the VA Domiciliary, where Lakota veteran Joseph Brown Thunder noted "this is sacred, healing ground. Veterans have been here for many years for the healing that takes place. This healing circle needs to be maintained."

Fellow Lakota veteran Myron Pourier said he was proud to be standing with his brothers and sisters and shared that when he and other Lakota went to Washington, D.C., to meet with Secretary of Veterans Affairs head Eric Shinsecki, "Nobody in D.C. is aware of what is happening here. The D.C. office doesn't know of the underhanded, corrupt dealings that are taking place."

Pourier said that none of the petitions signed to keep the Hot Springs VA facility open have been sent to Washington.

"I am going back in a few weeks," he said. "Get the petitions together, get them to me and I will hand deliver them to (Shinsecki)."

The keynote address was given by J. David Cox, the national secretary/treasurer of American Federation of Government Employees.

“One thousand people turned out today to fight for the men and women who fought for them,” Cox said. “I challenge everyone in South Dakota to in turn challenge their members of Congress and ask ‘Are you voting for veterans?’”

Cox said when he returns to Washington, he will knock on doors and tell elected representatives on Capitol Hill to support all VAs, particularly the one in Hot Springs.

“Why close this facility? We should be expanding it,” Cox said. “Our veterans deserve the best care possible for the sacrifice they have made and that care needs to be done at a VA facility.”

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/more-than-participate-in-welcome-home-veterans-march-saturday/article_9f5e69ac-602b-11e1-b64c-001871e3ce6c.html

Elected representatives request time extension

February 29, 2012 4:42 pm • By Curt Nettinga

Cite lack of FOIA answers

HOT SPRINGS – For the second time in two months, South Dakota’s Congressional delegation has sent a joint letter to Eric Shinsecki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, regarding the VA Black Hills Health Care System’s proposed changes to the Hot Springs VA.

The letter, signed by Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune, as well as Rep. Kristi Noem and dated Feb. 29, reminds Shinsecki that questions forwarded in a previous letter, dated Jan. 4, remain unanswered and that the delegation is “anxiously awaiting your reply...”

“We have yet to receive an answer to our request to extend the comment period beyond Feb. 29,” the letter adds. “We understand that the VA is considering announcing an extension to March 31. We write today to request that you reconsider this deadline.”

The delegation notes that while some of the Hot Springs Save the VA group’s Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests have begun to be answered, approximately half are still outstanding and may not be answered until two weeks into March.

“Answers to the FOIA requests and to our questions are necessary for the community to offer thoughtful, educated feedback and counter proposals. Therefore, we request that you offer an extension of no less than 30 days after the final FOIA request has been answered and all answers to the questions raised in our letter are received.”

The Save the VA Campaign’s Executive Committee issued a press release late on Wednesday afternoon, echoing many of the items noted in the legislator’s letter.

‘Despite the delay in receiving answers to the Freedom of Information requests, the workgroups continue to make progress in crafting comments and counter proposals to the Veteran Administration’s proposals. We appreciate the VA’s willingness to respond to our requests and we trust that they will be amenable to an extension for our responses. Our workgroups want to have accurate data to support our comments and counterproposals. Our responses, to a certain degree, rely on the release of accurate data.

We appreciate the involvement of our Congressional Delegation and their concern on the delay in receiving answers to their letter of January 4. Some of the data has been released and we have been led to believe that the agency is working on the remaining requests. Please be assured that the taxpayers and veterans will be well served by having our responses based on current and accurate data. We wish to thank all parties, our Congressional delegation, the VA and our hardworking subgroups for the efforts being put into this project.’

Veteran and retired VA employee Bob Nelson summed the letter up in a single comment.

“Things are coming together,” Nelson said. “Steve (DiStasio) has got to be wondering what he started.”

http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/local/communities/hot-springs/elected-representatives-request-time-extension/article_31ecab0c-632f-11e1-8cb1-0019bb2963f4.html