



## Fight against VA proposal continues

January 05, 2012 11:16 am • By KERRI REMPP Record staff writer

The Dawes County commissioners met with a contingent of their colleagues from Fall River County, S.D., regarding a proposal to dismantle most of the current veterans' medical services in Hot Springs.

The Veterans Administration is proposing to move most of the services to Rapid City or to Fort Meade near Sturgis, drastically reducing staffing and services in Hot Springs over the next five years.

The Dawes County officials contacted Nebraska's senators and representatives last month arguing against the idea. Fall River County's Mike Ortner, Deb Russell and Joe Allen visited with Webb Johnson, Jake Stewart and Stacy Swinney about the idea and expressed gratitude for the county's support of efforts to keep the Hot Springs facilities in place.

"I've been fighting this for 30 years," Ortner said. The proposal is to move the services under the guise of better care but a bigger city doesn't always mean better, he said.

Hot Springs has what Ortner called an excellent post traumatic stress program, which has doubled to two dozen patients in recent years.

"It's one that could be expanded even more," he said.

Those patients especially need the low-key, low-pressure environment a smaller city can offer, Ortner said.

The officials from both counties encouraged the public to contact senators and representatives about the proposal and to voice their ideas at meetings taking place around the area.

Dawes County veterans receive \$7 million in benefits through the VA, and the county provides transportation to Hot Springs for veterans unable to drive themselves to medical appointments. A move to Rapid City or Sturgis would be an increased cost to the county, and leave open the possibility that veterans would neglect their care due to the additional travel, Swinney said.

The northern Panhandle counties, including Dawes, Sheridan and Sioux, are all on board with fighting to keep the services available in Hot Springs, he added.

Ortner said the public and local officials also need to stress to the VA that Fall River County needs more time to come up with alternatives to the VA's proposal.

“They’ve spent years on this proposal and they gave us two months to come up with alternatives,” Ortner said.

Russell noted that the proposal calls for having veterans receive care at local hospitals, touted as a benefit to veterans. While the local hospitals may be closer and more convenient, Russell said many of them may not be able to handle the influx of new patients or offer the needed services. In addition, the local hospitals will be put in the position of not knowing when they will receive payment for those veterans’ services.

Ortner pointed out that the VA requires hospitals to maintain a high level of accreditation to treat veterans, and many of the hospitals in small towns and cities will not meet those standards. Jeff Fankhauser, Dawes County’s veterans service officer, said in addition, the VA currently requires veterans to meet certain criteria in order to receive care from a local, non-VA facility. If that standard continues to apply only two to three percent of Dawes County’s approximately 800 veterans will be eligible to be treated locally.

“We’re leaving out the other 97 percent,” Fankhauser said.

The Dawes County Veterans Service Office and the American Legion Club will host a town hall meeting Friday, Jan. 6, at 1 p.m. with Steve DiStasio, director of the Black Hills VA Healthcare System, to discuss the proposal. The meeting will be held at the American Legion Club in Chadron, and the public is invited to attend. A similar meeting will take place at the Alliance Performing Arts Center at 5 p.m. Friday.

“Take a strong stand,” Ortner said.

For additional details on the proposal, visit [www.blackhills.va.gov/VABlackHillsFuture/](http://www.blackhills.va.gov/VABlackHillsFuture/).



## Elected delegation questions VA proposal

January 05, 2012 10:33 am

HOT SPRINGS - South Dakota's congressional delegation has joined the numerous veterans and others in the western side of the state who are questioning the proposal offered by the Black Hills Health Care System (VA) to change the health care landscape in the area.

A letter, from Senators Tim Johnson and John Thune as well as Representative Kristi Noem, was sent to Eric Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs in Washington, D.C. on Wednesday evening, according to a release sent from Thune's office Thursday morning to the *Hot Springs Star*.

In the letter, the delegation questions many portions of the proposal, often asking similar questions to those posed at several of the town hall meetings hosted by the VA since its Dec. 12 announcement.

Here is the letter, included in its entirety.

January 4, 2012

The Honorable Eric Shinseki

Secretary of Veterans Affairs

Department of Veterans Affairs

810 Vermont Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

We write today regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recent proposal to drastically change the way veterans in western South Dakota receive health care through the Black Hills Health Care System (BHHCS).

Since learning of this proposal, our offices have attended several of the VA's community forums on the subject and have received significant input from veterans, their families, VA employees, and community members throughout the region. There is no question the VA faces unique

challenges in South Dakota. Shortcomings and inefficiencies need to be addressed. However, while your agency has presented the reconfiguration the BHHCS would undergo as a result of this proposal, several questions remain concerning the reasoning behind the planned changes. In an effort to ensure that the quality of care our veterans receive is not compromised in any way we would appreciate your response to the following:

- During the community forums, many veterans expressed satisfaction with the care they have received at the Hot Springs Domiciliary and credit much of their successful treatment to the rural environment of the facility. In fact, numerous veterans from highly urban areas indicated that the isolated location of the domiciliary was a deciding factor in choosing Hot Springs for care. We believe a study, or available data contrasting the effectiveness and success rates of treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and substance abuse in rural and urban settings is merited.
- In 2010, what percentage of the veterans seeking treatment in the domiciliary's rehabilitation programs were from outside the BHHCS catchment area?
- It has been noted that construction of a new domiciliary in Rapid City placed sixth in the Fiscal Year 2012 VA Strategic Capital Investment Plan (SCIP) list of scored projects. In the SCIP, \$34 million is listed as the total estimated cost of this project. What is the estimated renovation cost to bring the domiciliary in Hot Springs into compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act regulations as well as other needed improvements?
- As part of the briefing our offices received regarding this proposal, it was noted that the Scottsbluff, Nebraska region is the fastest growing concentration of veterans in the BHHCS service area. Will a reduction in services at the Hot Springs facility create an unnecessary inconvenience for the area's fastest growing veteran population? Given the increased distance these veterans will be required to travel, how many patients does the BHHCS expect to lose to other service areas?
- In the VA plan, one inefficiency noted is the duplication of services, such as the police and fire departments at both the Fort Meade and Hot Springs facilities. What stipulates the need for these services and would they still be duplicated if the domiciliary is located in Rapid City?
- Other services cited as inefficient by way of duplication are laboratory and medical imaging; however, under the proposal these services would not only continue to be offered at Fort Meade and Hot Springs but would also be added to the Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Rapid City. Is it the plan of the VA to offer these services at all three BHHCS locations?
- Given the recent designation of the current domiciliary building as a National Historic Landmark, what is the projected annual cost to the VA for maintaining the buildings that are proposed to be unused?
- Concerned veterans and community members are being encouraged to share concerns and comments, and also produce counter-proposals for review. They were given until the end of February to submit such concerns and counter-proposals. Some concerned veterans and citizens

have already requested an extension to submit such counter-proposals. Would you entertain such an extension?

- The VA has indicated one option for care will be to coordinate with private facilities and providers in the respective local communities. It appears that at the time of the proposal's announcement and town hall discussions, however, that no contact had been secured with local providers and officials to determine if such a proposal is workable. Since the town hall meetings, there is an indication that local providers/facilities may not be able to absorb the potential increase in patient load, etc. There is also concern that local providers/facilities may not have the necessary equipment, space, personnel or understanding of VA policies to accommodate the increased workload. What is the VA doing to address these concerns? Is coordination with private facilities a feasible option?
- What is the cost of current contracted/fee basis care for the BHHCS? What is the anticipated cost to the VA for such care if this proposal moves forward and care is directed to private, community-based care?
- Do you foresee problems or challenges with delivery and quality of care under the fee basis/contract care provisions of the proposal? Veterans have shared concerns with the level of care already received during fee basis/contract care, and there is increased concern that this proposal, if enacted, will result in additional problems with issues ranging from payment for services, referrals for additional care and services, and scheduling concerns as to whether or not the promise to put veterans first will be maintained by private providers/facilities.
- What will the anticipated increased travel costs (beneficiary travel) be for veterans if they are referred to private facilities farther away from their home and the Hot Springs VA facility? For instance, will the VA automatically approve referred care by Fall River Health or any other private provider/facility to a non-VA specialist in other facilities? Currently, the VA must pre-authorize additional care to a non-VA provider/facility whether recommended by a VA or private provider.
- Native American veterans already have considerable problems obtaining transparent care from either the VA or Indian Health Service and this relationship has needed attention for many years. What assurances can you provide Native veterans that their promised care needs will be met in a timely and adequate fashion by Indian Health Service? These veterans can get care in a reasonable time frame now through the VA, but there are legitimate concerns that they may not receive such care if transferred to Indian Health Service.
- What do you see for the future of the Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program? Many veterans are concerned that there will be less, not more opportunities for CWT enrollees in Rapid City rather than Hot Springs.
- Will all surgeries be performed at the proposed renovated facility at Fort Meade or will there be a considerable amount of such services still contracted to local providers/facilities?

- Where will compensation/pension (C&Ps) exams be held? They have routinely been conducted at Hot Springs in recent years.
- What will happen to the Call Center if a new CBOC is built in Hot Springs?
- How will these proposals impact the State Veterans Home? It is our understanding that the State Veterans Home shares some of the services with the BHHCS and depends on many CWT employees.
- What is the number of employees that work at the Hot Springs VA and live in Hot Springs (or Fall River County)?
- What would the hours be for the Hot Springs CBOC? Would it be open 5 days a week?
- Who has the liability responsibility should a veteran wish to file a claim against the private provider? Currently, veterans can file a tort claim through the VA if there is a problem with care. How would that be handled if there are problems with the private provider/facility?

While we understand that some realignment of services may be necessary, providing high quality health care to veterans must be the driving force behind any changes. We remain committed to improving access to and the quality of health care for South Dakota's veterans. Without question, they deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your service to our country. Should you have questions concerning this request, please feel free to contact our respective offices. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Kindest regards,

TIM JOHNSON      JOHN THUNE      KRISTI NOEM

U.S. Senator      U.S. Senator      Member of Congress

# Hot Springs hospital board worries about role VA plans



January 10, 2012 6:30 am • Kevin Woster Journal staff

HOT SPRINGS - The morning after the Department of Veterans Affairs announced a restructuring that would close the VA medical center here, Rich Nelson read the unsettling details online.

Nelson, a member of Fall River Health Services Board of Trustees, was surprised by the extent of the VA restructuring announced last month. But he was really caught off guard when VA officials identified Fall River Hospital as a key player in providing health services for veterans if the main VA center in Hot Springs closed.

"When I opened the Rapid City Journal website that morning, I was shocked," Nelson said. "Then when I saw our name was out there in several instances, I was dumbfounded."

As Nelson described his reaction recently in the board room at the Fall River Hospital, other trustees nodded in agreement. They agreed that they felt left out of the process that led to the VA announcement. Hospital chief executive officer Tricia Uhlir was notified by the VA in advance that the hospital would be mentioned, but to what degree was unclear.

The board worried not just about the VA announcement and its impact but also about how the surprising details were playing across Hot Springs, a community that calls itself "The Veterans' Town" and now fights the VA closure.

Board members said they are open to discussion with VA officials about how the hospital could offer more services to more veterans if that becomes necessary. But they want the community and the veterans it serves to know that they were not part of the plan for this VA restructuring.

"We would step in and take care of those veterans," board member Anna Merrill said. "But we don't want to be seen as helping the VA leave this community. If anyone feels like we were enabling or complicit in that move, it's not the case."

The director of the VA Black Hills Health System, Steve DiStasio, confirmed that there was no advanced planning with the Fall River Health Services board prior to the announcement. DiStasio didn't have his first meeting with board members and Uhlir until after the announcement and after he had begun a series of public meetings to explain the proposed restructuring.

"It was just that sort of first conversation, where I could tell them what the VA is thinking about and give them a chance to ask questions," DiStasio said. "I think there are more meetings to come."

Board members hope so. At this point, they worry about how the private hospital and its staff would mesh with a federal entity and its red tape. One key issue is how medical-records issues would be handled since the VA has a highly sophisticated, highly secure electronic records system.

Matching that would likely require a complicated and expensive upgrade for the private hospital, board president Rich Olstad said.

"How would that work? If we would have to buy the system the government has, it would be very costly," Olstad said. "Would we have access to their medical records? Even after meeting with them, we don't have a clear idea of their plan."

Board members said VA officials have worried about the problems in connecting with a private system. Those worries surfaced when board members suggested the idea of locating a private hospital at the existing VA campus.

The board was looking for creative options as it faced the expensive realities of remodeling or replacing the community's aging hospital. The sprawling, mostly unused VA hospital in Hot Springs seemed like an option, said Dr. Garry Strauser, a board member and former VA radiologist in Hot Springs.

At one time the VA hospital operated more than 200 beds but dwindled to 10 beds, only five or which are occupied on an average night. Strauser understands that economic pressures had an effect. But he and other board members also contend that the patient census fell as the VA cut services in Hot Springs.

"You keep cutting service and doing away with things, your numbers are going to fall," Olstad said.

Even so, it seemed logical to use the space somehow. But when the board approached the VA about operating a private hospital inside its medical campus, the VA wasn't interested, Strauser said.

"We talked to them and the bottom line was that there was too much red tape," he said. "And I wonder what happened to all that red tape now? I think it's still there."

Ultimately, the board decided to build a \$20 million Fall River Hospital, which opened almost two years ago in a picturesque setting along S.D. Highway 71 south of Hot Springs. Board members are proud of the hospital they built without seeking money from area taxpayers but worry about its limitations in providing care for veterans.

It is a 25-bed hospital with a solid daily census of 10 and a promising future. But board members worry how the VA partnership would work.

"There's lots of hurdles for us to be able to provide an acceptable level of care for our veterans," Merrill said.

After 23 years with the VA, Strauser feels like he understands the special needs and complications of providing high-quality health care for veterans.

"Yes, there are basic needs for all patients, but there is definitely a set of things in veterans that are unique," he said. "You deal with mandates and regulations of the VA, issues such as Agent Orange and PTSD, the Gulf War Syndrome, and screenings for those.

"Many of these mental health issues are unique to veterans, and we don't have a mental-health program at our hospital," Strauser said.

The VA proposal would maintain an outpatient clinic in Hot Springs, and Strauser admitted that some of the veterans' needs could be addressed there. The proposal also would close the VA Domiciliary, a century-old sandstone structure where veterans received residential treatment for substance abuse, PTSD and other disorders.

The proposal would build a new treatment center in Rapid City, which has a growing concentration of veterans in need. But Rich Nelson wonders about the wisdom of that move.

Veterans at the Domiciliary become a part of Hot Springs in the weeks or months they are there, he said. The community welcomes and respects them, which could help in their recovery, Nelson said.

"They show up in town and pretty soon you see them in church. You get to know them a little bit, and then they're gone," he said. "But for a short period of time they're part of this community. And we treat them that way."

Merrill put it more emphatically.

"They are 'vets' with a capital 'V' here. And, yes, they are part of the community," she said. "Will they get that in Rapid City?"

Contact Kevin Woster at 394-8413 or [kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com](mailto:kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com)

# Panhandle veterans support Hot Springs VA



January 10, 2012 3:50 am • By George Ledbetter Chadron Record

CHADRON, Neb. - A standing-room-only crowd filled the American Legion Club in Chadron last Friday afternoon, to weigh in on the recently announced plans to close the VA hospital at Hot Springs, expand services offered at the VA facility in Ft. Meade, near Sturgis, construct a new VA clinic in Rapid City and provide more medical services to veterans through contracts with local hospitals and clinics.

Most of the more than 250 veterans and family members present at the meeting with VA Black Hills director Steve DiStasio seemed opposed to the plan, and strongly supportive of maintaining the services currently offered at the Hot Springs facility.

"The care we get at Hot Springs is professional. It's quality care," said Bill Tuma of Gordon, Neb. "At other facilities you are rushed in and out. The care is substandard. (The proposal) is not going to solve the problems. It will exacerbate them so veterans are shorted again."

"It's obvious nobody here is in favor of your proposals," said Jim Wright of Rushville. "We have all tried the local hospitals and compared to Hot Springs, it doesn't work. Hot Springs is the best thing I've ever been to."

The men's sentiments were reflective of comments by more than a dozen speakers who questioned DiStasio about the merits of the proposals first advanced in mid-December, or praised the services at the Hot Springs VA center.

"Why are we moving? Why don't we keep the facilities we have instead of building something new?" asked Jerry Reed of Chadron, to applause from the audience.

"Hot Springs is the greatest," said Boyd Roberts of Chadron.

DiStasio opened the session, one of several held in the Nebraska Panhandle and elsewhere since the plan was announced, by explaining the rationale for closing the nearly-century-old Hot Springs VA. The Hot Springs VA hospital averages only five patients per day, not enough to be cost effective, and maintaining the historic, but aging sandstone buildings at the facility is too expensive, DiStasio said. "The buildings are getting old, Many are beyond their life expectancy and difficult to maintain for health care."

The area's widely scattered veteran population is also dwindling, which makes it difficult justify keeping the existing facilities at Hot Springs and Fort Meade open, DiStasio suggested. By 2020 the number of veterans living in the Black Hills VA's region will have dropped from 33,000 to about 26,000, he said. "There are challenges when you have that size."

The plan would keep out-patient services at Hot Springs, but move in-patient hospital care and surgery to an expanded Fort Meade facility, as well as provide more services at local hospitals and clinics through contract arrangements, said DiStasio. That would be more convenient for veterans, who now must drive to Hot Springs for medical services that could possibly be provided closer to a veteran's home by a local clinic or hospital, he said. "Instead of a veteran having to travel, might we buy that care in their local community?" DiStasio said. "We want to talk about more local access."

But several speakers challenged the ability, and desire, of local medical facilities to provide adequate care for veterans. "I wonder if these private contractors even want us," said Jim Kearn of Hay Springs. "They can make more money off someone else."

"One of the issues we have is trust," said Bill Wegner of Chadron. "We don't trust the local (medical services). We know what we will get in Hot Springs."

Expanding the use of contracting, instead of paying providers per "episode" would enable the VA to have more control over the quality of services offered by local providers, countered DiStasio. "We can tell them the rules," he said.

But contracted service providers still won't be able to maintain the existing standards of care, said Dean Myers of Hay Springs. "It falls short of what your employees do now," he said. "We know we aren't going to get the same care."

Myers also questioned DiStasio's repeated statement that the proposal to close the Hot Springs center "isn't a done deal."

"It's apparent to everyone here that the train has left the station," he said.

There may still be a chance to derail the plan, said others, including some people from Hot Springs.

A letter from all three members of the South Dakota congressional delegation to VA Secretary Eric Shinseki raised a number of significant issues with the plan, said Don Ackerman of Hot Springs. And veterans should register their opinions with Nebraska Senators Nelson and

Johanns, as well as the state's Third District U.S. Representative Adrian Smith, said Bob Nelson of Hot Springs. "We disagree with everything they are saying here," he said.

Comments received at the public meetings will be forwarded to the VA's main office in Washington, D.C., where the final decision on the proposal will be made, said DiStasio. If approved, the plan would be phased in over a period of five years or more, he said, and the VA would attempt to find another use for the Hot Springs property, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

# Veterans Fight To Save Hospital

By Derek Olson

Published: January 11, 2012, 6:05 PM

HOT SPRINGS, SD - Sacrifice is something veterans know well.

"I went into the Navy in 1945. I served 19 months over in Guam, Tinian, Peleliu," veteran Norman Pudwill said.

"Joined the Army in 1967. Went to Vietnam when I was 17, did two tours before I was 20," veteran Don Ackerman said.

Now they feel like they're being forced to make another sacrifice. And losing the VA in Hot Springs is one they don't want to make

"You can't farm people out to different hospitals, different organizations and get the care that we got here at the VA," Pudwill said.

"Not only that, 15 years from now there aren't going to be any special facilities with special people who understand special needs," Ackerman said.

So veterans of all generations are coming together and forming committees.

Some are looking at the potential impact of a closure; others are double checking the data in the VA's proposal.

"Intelligence is something that I did in the military for a long time. So I know how to gather intelligence, read intelligence. I know how to shift through what's right and what's a lie," Ackerman said.

Most everyone here agrees there are problems with the system, but they don't believe that closing the facility is the answer.

"We need that patient care here. We're taking care of Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado and South Dakota here. We have a lot of veterans in Hot Springs. We are a veterans town," Pudwill said.

"Our town is pretty special, okay? Anybody who's been here will tell you that. But it's not about the town. It's about the veteran," Ackerman said.

The veteran's counter proposal should be done in a month or so. Then, the vets will march up to the Hot Springs VA to hand deliver the documents.

© 2012 KELOLAND TV. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.keloland.com/News/NewsDetail6371.cfm?Id=126016>



## **KENT: Suit or no suit, no one's buying VA plan**

January 12, 2012 6:30 am • Jim Kent Journal columnist

Contrary to mathematical belief, the biggest distance between two points ... of view ... may be the business suit.

Although this doesn't necessarily hold true when the "like objects attract" scientific theory is applied (suits tend to congregate with other suits), it's certainly a common occurrence when suits are in proximity to non-suits: average folks in jeans, sweatshirts, boots, sneakers and (God save us from inappropriate meeting attire) without ties!

This thought came to mind while at the Hot Springs Mueller Center in mid-December for the first of a series of public meetings to discuss the "proposed" closing of the VA's health care facility in this Southern Hills town.

On stage stood Steve DiStasio, now director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System. Dressed in dark suit, white shirt and tie he was picture-perfect for any corporate board meeting.

Of course, the problem was that DiStasio wasn't at a corporate board meeting — or a federal government conference. He was at a community center in small town America and about to tell the hundreds of average folks in the audience (nary a tie among them) that he was "proposing" to close down their VA health care center.

At the same time, and promising a miraculous reversal of physical properties comparable to Christ's water-to-wine demonstration, DiStasio assured them that while completely dismantling services at the current VA Hot Springs facility, he would actually change nothing at all.

Right ... no converts.

As hundreds booed and heckled DiStasio's attempts to rationalize his decision ... er, proposal ... regarding closing down ... er, realigning services at the Hot Springs facility, my memory rewound to the 1970s. I recalled watching smug-faced corporate suits sit on a stage in Niagara Falls, N.Y., during the evening news and tell average folks that the massive pollution they'd caused in the working-class Love Canal neighborhood really wasn't a problem at all. Right ... no converts there, either.

After the Hot Springs gathering, I commented to a few people that I could never quite grasp why bureaucrats and corporate types consistently show up for “town hall/common folk” type meetings dressed in suits.

“I don’t know that those in the audience would trust them any more than they already don’t if they wore jeans and a sweater instead of a suit,” I remarked. “But it might show that they’re at least attempting to be one of the community.”

As if by magic ... fast forward to Jan. 6 and the American Legion Hall in Chadron, Neb. The VA held town hall meetings here and in Alliance in an “oops, we must’ve forgot you folks, but we really do care” attempt to sell the “proposed” changes for VA health care in the Black Hills.

It’s the same message from last month’s meetings across Western South Dakota and other parts of Nebraska: close down the facility and open a clinic at the civilian hospital in Hot Springs (though the VA hadn’t checked on that), or use Indian Health Services facilities (which haven’t been able to care for Native Americans properly for years), or ....

The crowd’s questions are also the same, starting with “how can you say you’re closing down the Hot Springs VA due to high maintenance costs and then say you might lease it out afterwards and just pay for the maintenance costs of the same facility?”

The “boos” and the heckling in Chadron are also the same. In fact, the only thing that’s different is Steve DiStasio: no suit and no tie.

Nope ... the crowd still wasn’t buying it.

Jim Kent lives in Hot Springs. Write to [kentvfte@gwtc.net](mailto:kentvfte@gwtc.net).

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/kent-suit-or-no-suit-no-one-s-buying-va/article\\_f637894e-3cad-11e1-afba-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/opinion/kent-suit-or-no-suit-no-one-s-buying-va/article_f637894e-3cad-11e1-afba-0019bb2963f4.html)

# AFGE Fights Proposed Closure of Historic Hot Springs VA Facility

(WASHINGTON) – The American Federation of Government Employees strongly objects to the proposed closing of the historic Hot Springs, South Dakota VA Medical Center. The Department of Veterans Affairs has proposed shuttering this facility, which is part of the Black Hill Health Care System, covering South Dakota, and portions of Nebraska, North Dakota, Wyoming and Montana. The dismantling of this facility would force veterans to attend other facilities in the network that are between 50 and 100 miles away or be pushed to private sector health care centers that may lack the expertise in treating veterans.

“Hot Springs is a veterans’ town and our VA facility has served America’s heroes for more than 100 years. The proposal by the agency to close the doors of this veterans’ care center, on top of its already diminished capacities, is an outrage,” said Patrick Russell, president of AFGE Local 1539. “This has become a pattern with the VA, where we are finding the agency systematically closing its in-patient care facilities, in order to solely operate outpatient clinics and be in the business of managing contracts with the private sector. This is no way to care for our nation’s vets.”

AFGE members, the American Legion, veterans, community members and other supporters have mobilized grassroots efforts in Hot Springs to petition the agency to keep the facility open to area veterans. The historic facility has been the ideal location to treat those with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health conditions, given its small town atmosphere.

“We are deeply concerned by the VA’s proposal to close this facility, which has been a pillar in the Hot Springs community for more than a century. Veterans have praised the care they’ve received at this location and the agency would be doing a major disservice to our nation’s heroes by diminishing the services provided at this facility,” said J. David Cox, AFGE National Secretary-Treasurer. “Our mission to care for those who have sacrificed for this country should not be overshadowed by VA management’s desire to outsource veteran care to the highest bidder.”

For more information on the grassroots efforts to maintain the services at the Hot Springs VA Medical Center please visit [www.theveterantown.com](http://www.theveterantown.com).

###

*The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) is the largest federal employee union, representing 670,000 workers in the federal government and the government of the District of Columbia. For the latest AFGE news and information, follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).*

<http://www.afge.org/Index.cfm?Page=PressReleases&PressReleaseID=1346>

# Veterans speak to National American Legion representatives



January 17, 2012 3:50 am • By Curt Nettinga

## *Task force hears testimony, tours VA*

HOT SPRINGS - For the second time in three weeks, the meeting room at the Hot Springs American Legion was standing room only, with the Black Hills Health Care System's proposal to restructure services as the main topic.

Last Tuesday night, however, those hearing the testimonials from dozens of veterans in attendance included members of the national "A System Worth Saving" Task Force.

Warren Goldstein, a veteran and National Field Service Representative from Washington, D.C., and Todd White, a veteran from Wyoming, are members of the task force. They were in Hot Springs to conduct a two-day tour of the facility.

Also in attendance were numerous state American Legion officials from both South Dakota and Nebraska, including Paul Evenson of Garretson, the South Dakota representative on the National American Legion Executive Committee.

Goldstein declined any specifics of the group's tour at Tuesday night's gathering, but noted the task force is charged with visiting similar facilities around the country.

"Last year," Goldstein said, "we toured 46 facilities and this year we are going to 25 more." The focus of the task force this year is on rural health care, making a stop at the Hot Springs VA an important one. The visit happened to fall when tremendous turmoil over the VA's proposal ripples through the community.

What the group heard were passionate pleas to "leave this place the way it is," from veterans, many of whom stated they had moved to the Hot Springs area specifically for the care that was available at the VA medical center.

Evenson pointed out that the S.D. American Legion had passed a resolution last year, recommending that the Hot Springs VA be retained as is. He told the audience, "We're with you on this," during the introductions.

He also noted the numerous signs that greet visitors throughout the city, proclaiming the community's support for keeping the VA as it is.

One Afghanistan and Iraq veteran from Wyoming told the task force members that he traveled from his home for treatment at the domiciliary in Hot Springs.

"I came to the dom to get my self straightened out," the emotional young man said. "They know me here; know my name. It's a great facility; why would you want to change it?"

Another veteran, a woman who said she moved from Hawaii to be at the Hot Springs VA, also praised the care she has received at the facility.

"I have PTSD and have dealt with it for 40 years," she said, "since I got out of the service. Enclosed spaces bother me and that is why Hot Springs is extremely wonderful. It is a healing place and it feels like a safe place to be. When the young men and women come back from Afghanistan and Iraq, they are going to need a safe place to get started too."

The task force members continued their tour of the facility on Wednesday and then Goldstein said that information would be sent back to Washington. When all of the inspections are completed, Goldstein said, the information will be compiled in a final report and disseminated throughout the American Legion and to elected representatives in Washington, D.C., as well as VA personnel.

VA employees' union president Pat Russell noted that the proposal presented by the Black Hills Health Care System follows patterns at other VA facilities, in Nebraska and Iowa, where medical centers had been closed in favor of Community Based Outreach Clinics.

"It hasn't worked out very well there, has it?" Russell asked Nebraska American Legion Commander George Cyboron, who nodded his agreement.

"I believe Secretary Eric Shinseki (head of the Department of Veteran's Affairs) is an honorable man," Russell continued, "but instead of having veterans in advisory positions, he has business people, who are trying to run our veteran's healthcare as a business. They are thinking dollars first and healthcare second. I think that there needs to be a housecleaning from the top down and put veterans back in those advisory positions."

Hot Springs resident and veteran Ed Harvey testified that he learned several veterans who had gone through the domiciliary for substance abuse or PTSD therapy had then been shipped, "By Mr. DiStasio" to a homeless shelter in Rapid City.

"As a citizen," Harvey said, "I am ashamed at this. Imagine having the courage to drag yourself up from that situation, only to be thrust back in. This cannot be done to our veterans."

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/news/veterans-speak-to-national-american-legion-representatives/article\\_edfd7718-406b-11e1-8e97-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/news/veterans-speak-to-national-american-legion-representatives/article_edfd7718-406b-11e1-8e97-0019bb2963f4.html)

# John DiCiaccio

January 17, 2012 2:09 pm

To the Editor:

Most folks are unaware of the Spiritual aspect our VAMC has to offer its veterans that is unique to the way we heal our wounded warriors.

The Sweat Lodge is a sacred Lakota cultural and spiritual way of healing, established on campus in 1992. The Lodge was created by two veterans; Duey Braveheart with his wife June and Richard Galeano. Braveheart is a Lakota spiritual healer and a Vietnam veteran.

This "non-traditional" method of healing offers a more down-to-earth approach to the overall physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of the veteran.

It's estimated that since 1992 more than 5,000 veterans have attended the Sweat Lodge at least once during their treatment here; many came every Friday afternoon during their stay.

Along with the sacredness and the beauty of our Southern Black Hills, the Sweat Lodge is unique to the Hot Springs VAMC. Rapid City and Fort Meade are unable to offer this holistic approach for their veterans.

Closing the Hot Springs VAMC will also close the doors on a vital way of practicing one's way of worship; no different than closing doors on a church. No one has the right to deny anyone the Freedom to Worship, not even Washington D.C. This is a Fundamental and a Constitutional right. The Sweat Lodge offers our wounded warriors an alternative method of healing and shouldn't be forgotten in our efforts to save the Medical Center.

To quote Calvin Coolidge: "A Nation that forgets its fighters, will one day itself be forgotten."

John DiCiaccio

Hot Springs

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/opinion/john-diciaccio/article\\_a37fa3b2-4086-11e1-8740-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/opinion/john-diciaccio/article_a37fa3b2-4086-11e1-8740-0019bb2963f4.html)

# ‘Save the VA Campaign’ holds informational meeting

January 21, 2012 3:30 am • Curt Nettinga Hot Springs Star

HOT SPRINGS -- Nearly a month to the day after organizing at a Dec. 21 meeting, the separate committees that make up the Save the VA Campaign shared information with the public and each other Friday night at the Mueller Civic Center.

Pat Russell, one of the organizers of the group, said the Friday meeting was to outline steps that should be taken to “return our Hot Springs VA to what it was 20 years ago.”

The informational meeting took on the manner of a pep rally of sorts, as the different committee chairs, or spokespersons shared each group’s vision and goal for the next few weeks. Some new information was shared with those in attendance, while other committees are still in the early stages of their work.

Barb Fetters, who chairs the committee on how the VA’s proposal would affect Fall River Hospital, shared some revealing information that her committee had put together in a short time.

Fetters said members of her group had spoken to people associated with seven VAs that were scheduled for closure, as is proposed for Hot Springs.

Fetters said that of the seven VAs scheduled for contraction, the four that ultimately stayed open worked at it.

“They made a loud and joyful noise,” Fetters said. “They fought the action through many different means including letters, phone calls and picket signs.”

She added that the other three facilities, which closed, did not do much to counter the proposal presented.

“In most cases, what we found as well is that what the VA promised in the form of care was not what was delivered,” she said. “Many veterans said that they were made to feel like second-class citizens.”

Historic Preservation committee chair Amanda Campbell said that several of the members of the committee had met with state historical officials, to find out where to go for assistance and which organizations can help the Hot Springs effort.

“We want to keep this as the healing place that it has been for the past 100 years,” Campbell said. She also revealed that the National Trust for Historic Preservation had nominated the VA campus for National Treasure status, which would accompany its National Historic Landmark designation.

“This is coming from them,” Campbell said. “It means a lot when the organization chooses you.”

Veteran and organizer Don Ackerman closed the meeting by announcing that on Saturday, Feb. 25, a peaceful march is planned, from the Hot Springs American Legion to the VA campus, to deliver the Save the VA Campaign’s “list of demands.”

“We are closing in on them,” Ackerman said, “like they have never been closed in on before.”

# Administrators should step aside

January 24, 2012 3:30 am • In Our View editorial by the Hot Springs Star

Since the Dec. 12 announced proposal by the Black Hills Health Care System to change how veterans in our area would receive care, we have seen a tremendous surge of community support for keeping things as they are and even increasing services at the VA campus in Hot Springs.

This support has been felt throughout the Southern Hills and into Nebraska, as many have made their voices heard. As a united front, "Leave the Hot Springs VA alone," has been the message.

The "Save the VA Campaign" committees briefed the public at a Friday meeting and the wide-ranging, diligent, voluntary work done by those on the committees is commendable, both from the standpoint of retaining a better care center for veterans and how it has energized the community.

On the horizon is the expectation that, at some point the 'proposal' may morph into a 'plan.' At that time we would expect that all of the testimony gathered - by the vocal majority at town meetings as well as through comment cards, phone calls, e-mails and letters - will be given its due.

Should a plan be formulated and should that plan be examined for implementation, we feel that those associated with the formation of the original proposal excuse themselves from the decision-making process.

Having people responsible for forming the original proposal - such as Dr. Robert Petzel, the VA's Under-Secretary for Health and former Veteran's Integrated Service Network 23 director, current VISN Director Janet Murphy and BHHCS director Stephen DiStasio - making the final decision, in any capacity, is fundamentally flawed.

Those offering testimony at town hall meetings have noted Dr. Petzel saying, "Hot Springs needs to be closed down."

Connecting the dots from Dr. Petzel to former BHHCS director Peter Henry and on to Henry's protégé DiStasio is a simple exercise.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive that those who drew up the 'proposal' could enter into a decision on how to proceed with any subsequent 'plan' with objectivity.

We feel that those involved in the formation of the proposal should excuse themselves from the decision-making process. If an objective decision is to be made, they should not be a part of it. It is the right thing to do.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hot springs star/opinion/administrators-should-step-aside/article\\_e3a6cb14-45e0-11e1-b52e-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hot springs star/opinion/administrators-should-step-aside/article_e3a6cb14-45e0-11e1-b52e-0019bb2963f4.html)

# Veteran: 'Hot Springs VA saved my life'

January 24, 2012 3:30 am • By Mary Goulet

## *Special to the Hot Springs Star*

HOT SPRINGS - If not for the VA in Hot Springs, U.S. Army veteran Paul Kelly, 55, says he would either be in prison or dead today.

"Once an addict, you are one for life, but the treatment I received at the VA Domiciliary in Hot Springs saved my life," said Kelly in a recent interview about how he came to find recovery at the Hot Springs VA Medical Center - a more than century-old facility that has recently been proposed to close its doors.

According to Kelly, no other VA Dom can compare to the one he found in Hot Springs and that he would probably not go to any other.

Kelly said he first came to Hot Springs after a perceptive medical doctor at the Minneapolis VA recommended it to him.

He had been working in the Twin Cities for seven years when he made an appointment with his VA physician because of a knee injury he suffered while in the Army.

This doctor realized that Kelly was a drug addict and in need of treatment and told him that he should seek help.

According to that VA physician, the best kept secret in the VA system was the excellent rehab treatment in the little town of Hot Springs, Kelly said.

After two failed marriages, a loss of connection with his children, and scary scenarios of overdosing on drugs - he was ready to get the help he knew he needed.

Growing up in Texas, Kelly said he started using alcohol during the second grade and pot in fifth grade. Drugs were easily obtainable and he graduated into heroin and cocaine use. During his time in the Army he was surrounded by soldiers who had done tours in Vietnam and who were heavily into heroin.

While in Texas, he almost killed a man while he was drunk.

It frightened him into giving up the booze permanently, but the other drugs were more tenacious and he knew he was an addict and needed help.

He had tried rehab in San Antonio, but according to Paul it was "a waste of time, a joke, and two weeks of shake and bake with uncaring and insincere counselors."

Urged by his Minneapolis VA physician, Kelly agreed to attempt treatment at the VA in Hot Springs in 1999.

But against his counselor's advice he left after just six months.

Two hours after he left, while hitching a ride east on the interstate, he was back on drugs.

He went through treatment a second time and, once again, he left after six months. This time he stayed clean for a year and a half.

The third time through treatment, he finally "got it," and he has been clean and sober for about nine years.

Looking back on his time at the Hot Springs VA, Kelly said he wishes he had followed the counselor's advice and remained in treatment for a year the first time. The counselors were truly caring and "the nurses in the hospital were angels," he said.

While getting treatment in the Hot Springs Dom, he volunteered to visit a terminal patient in the hospital.

Paul listened to his stories about how he was waiting for his son to visit him.

Each time Kelly visited the other veteran he could see that he was getting yellower. On the fifth day he knew the man was dying as he watched a nurse sit by his bedside and hold his hand through the night until the man died.

The son never did come.

After getting clean and sober, Kelly made the choice to remain in Hot Springs and feels that it is tranquil, and it is his "safe zone."

It is a place in which it is easier for him to stay clean, away from the bad vibes of the larger cities, he said.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/community/veteran-hot-springs-va-saved-my-life/article\\_62035906-45e0-11e1-bb92-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/community/veteran-hot-springs-va-saved-my-life/article_62035906-45e0-11e1-bb92-0019bb2963f4.html)

# Smith Urges VA to Delay Decision on Hot Springs Service Reductions

Jan 27, 2012

**Washington, D.C.** – Congressman Adrian Smith (R-NE), Co-Chair of the Rural Veterans Caucus, today sent a second letter to the Director of the VA Black Hills Health Care System, Stephen DiStasio, calling for the VA to allow more time to review a proposed reduction in services at their Hot Springs, SD facility.

**“As I stated in my previous letter, this proposal will impact thousands of veterans in the Third District of Nebraska,”** wrote Smith. **“While I appreciate you holding additional community meetings so affected veterans could have the opportunity to voice their concerns about the proposal, your timeline for making a final decision on the matter must allow for the careful consideration of all of the feedback from these meetings.”**

**“I urge you to allow more time to fully consider the implications of the proposal, review the comments from affected veterans, and assure their access to health care will not be reduced,”** Smith continued. **“Until these concerns have been addressed, I request you delay any final decision.”**

In a December 21st letter to DiStasio, Smith successfully persuaded the VA to hold additional public meetings in Alliance and Chadron on January 6, 2012. Smith has also urged Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki to reconsider the proposed service reductions. Reports show increasing the distances veterans are forced to travel causes many to choose to delay or even go without the care they require.

Click [here](#) to view the full letter.

<http://adriansmith.house.gov/press-release/smith-urges-va-delay-decision-hot-springs-service-reductions#.TybOBTZKjlp.facebook>

# Hot Springs VA prominent in Thune town hall



January 29, 2012 5:00 am • Kevin Woster Journal staff

Sen. John Thune held a town hall meeting Saturday in Rapid City that was focused on federal spending and the economy.

But it didn't take long for VA health care to come up.

The crowd of about 150 at the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology was more than half veterans and supporters. About 80 arrived in two buses from Hot Springs prior to the town hall.

The first question following Thune's presentation on the federal budget was about a restructuring proposal by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs that would close the VA medical facilities in Hot Springs. And questions about that plan were mixed in among others throughout Thune's 90-minute meeting.

Thune, R-S.D., said that he and Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., and Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., were waiting for a VA response to a letter the delegation sent in early this month seeking more specifics on the restructuring proposal and asking for more time for public comment and possibly a study on key provisions.

But Ken Davidson, a Navy veteran who lives in Hot Springs and gets a variety of health services from the VA there, told Thune that he feared the VA was moving ahead with its plan while the delegation waited for a response.

"My concern is that you're waiting for an answer from them, but they keep proceeding ahead," Davidson said. "How do we stop this from going forward?"

Thune said the delegation's letter was intended to "put the brakes on" the VA proposal while questions were answered.

"My expectation is that nothing is going to happen until we hear back and have a discussion with the VA about the issues and questions we've raised," he said.

Many of those who rode the buses up from Hot Springs carried signs such as "Save the Hot Springs VA" and "Hot Springs VA: We Love Our Vets." Richard Galeano, a 73-year-old Air Force veteran, sat in the front row of the meeting room with a "Hot Springs: The Veterans Town" sign affixed to his oxygen tank.

Galeano said he fears the VA will take away the health-care options he earned in five years of service and expected to continue receiving in Hot Springs.

"I couldn't get better health care anywhere else," he said.

Galeano also warned Thune that steep cuts in the military will bring a repeat in history, when downsizing in defense spending left the nation to be vulnerable to attacks.

Thune said the country must change its high-spending ways or face the kind of economic troubles currently besetting many nations in Europe. But leaning too heavily on defense cuts would be a grave mistake, he said.

"We have got to get spending under control," he said. "And you don't do it by gutting the defense budget."

But the nation can't continue to spend \$3.6 trillion a year while only taking in \$2.3 trillion, filling in the gap with borrowed money, he said.

Revising the budgeting program to make spending hikes more difficult would help, he said. And entitlement programs should be restructured so that Social Security and Medicare are secure for the future without affecting seniors of today, he said.

Reversing the trend toward more government regulations will help industry expand and the economy recovery and resume vital growth, he said.

"The best solution we have for all our problems is a growing economy," Thune said.

After the town hall, Davidson said he understood the importance of the other questions asked. But he was a little disappointed, too.

"We thought it would be a lot more about the VA," he said.

Contact Kevin Woster at 394-8413 or [kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com](mailto:kevin.woster@rapidcityjournal.com).

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/hot-springs-va-prominent-in-thune-town-hall/article\\_f452dbd4-4a35-11e1-b293-0019bb2963f4.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/news/hot-springs-va-prominent-in-thune-town-hall/article_f452dbd4-4a35-11e1-b293-0019bb2963f4.html)

# Nebraska veteran involved in new fight now



January 31, 2012 3:30 am • By Mary Goulet, Special to the Hot Springs Star

## FOCUS ON VETERANS

VALENTINE, Neb. - James Edwards may have retired from the U.S. Navy as a chief petty officer after 25 years and eight months - having served in active duty from 1959 to 1972 and then the military reserves until 1998 - but he is still very active as an assistant Veteran's Service Officer and volunteer driver in Cherry County, Neb., home to 492 veterans.

From his home in Valentine, Neb., Edwards is very active in local veterans' service organizations by serving as a Post Commander and the current District Commander of the Nebraska VFW. He is also a 40-year member of the American Legion in Valentine, the Sons of American Legion and the Vietnam Veterans of America at Large.

His commendations and medals received during his years of service are too numerous to mention, but they indicate a man who is willing to fight another battle - the one to keep open the Hot Springs VA and Domiciliary in Hot Springs, S.D.

Edwards said he believes that it is important for veterans to have trust in their providers. The potential loss of contact with the medical staff that they have bonded with over the years at the Hot Springs VA will sever that sense of security.

He is also concerned about the increased hazards of the added miles, and the extra travel costs, if the veterans in Cherry County will have to drive to Fort Meade or Rapid City.

"The Cherry County Veterans Service Office has a good relationship with the County Commissioners, who have provided them with a mini-van and a budget for fuel and maintenance to take care of the transportation needs for veterans in our area who qualify for a free ride," Edwards said. "If we have to drive further, that just means our County budget has to go up to compensate for the expense. We are fortunate that the County Commissioners believe in helping the veterans by supporting us financially. Of course, it is tax-payer's money so we have to keep the cost in check."

Many veterans, such as Edwards, have proven that they will not go quietly into the night.

During his three-and-a-half Far East tours with the U.S. Navy, Edwards was on sea duty with Attack Squadron 52 and attached to two different aircraft carriers. During his two tours in Vietnam, he also later flew as an Aircrew man while attached to Patrol Squadron 9 followed by many more years stateside as a member of the Navy and Army Reserves.

After the service, while living in Jackson Hole, Wyo., he developed some PTSD symptoms.

He had nightmares and shaking. He believes that long hours on the flight deck, sleeping on the stub wings of airplanes while waiting for the next launch to go out - listening to the 50 some jet engines at launch time or waiting for planes to come back from bombing missions that lasted 24 hours a day - may have had an effect on his sleep, hearing and PTSD symptoms.

These symptoms appeared so many years after his active duty, that he didn't understand at the time that they were service-related problems.

He said he never sought treatment at the time, but feels he managed to cope, although he still is jumpy with sudden noises.

"You are waiting for the boom, but it is the one that you don't hear that gets you," he said.

Memories returned in his nightmares of seeing a fellow soldier, on his ship, dash up the steps from the catwalk in front of him, run into a moving propeller, and get shredded like "hamburger," with body parts flying everywhere, he said.

Another ugly memory was when the plane he was flying in during a test flight lost two of its engines and suddenly fell 5,000 feet.

Edwards, who was standing in the plane at the time, was forced to the ceiling, but made his way to the rear door and tried to bail out. He couldn't get the door open due to the pressure.

No one has lived from a crash of that particular aircraft, and he decided he would be the first. Fortunately, however, the flight crew managed to recover in time to pull out of the dive and he didn't have to bail out.

He still has dreams in which he is falling and cannot get a door open.

Since retiring, Edwards said he has used the VA facility in Mission, S.D., but said the care there was sporadic at best. Doctors and staff kept leaving.

He started to come to the Hot Springs VA in 2010 to be treated for tinnitus - the condition that resulted from the noise of screaming jets on the aircraft during combat. He feels that he has received great care that has been prompt and in a very friendly atmosphere.

In WW II, Edwards' father received a Purple Heart for his service in Europe. Combat was no stranger to his father, or to his son. Now this veteran of Vietnam has another war to win on the home front. He is going to marshal his veterans from Cherry County to join in the fight to save this special healing hospital for veterans.

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/community/nebraska-veteran-involved-in-new-fight-now/article\\_a900a75c-4b79-11e1-b3dd-001871e3ce6c.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/community/nebraska-veteran-involved-in-new-fight-now/article_a900a75c-4b79-11e1-b3dd-001871e3ce6c.html)

# Paul Nabholz

January 31, 2012 3:30 am

To the Editor:

It's impressive watching our community come together with bake sales, tee shirts, and committees to save the VA. What bugs me is that this shouldn't be necessary. U.S. taxpayers paid VA administrators lots of money to provide good health care at a reasonable price. Their job includes an obligation to prove the wisdom and cost-effectiveness of their proposal.

VA administrators failed at their job. Now county taxpayers are paying commissioners, who are spending our money to influence the administration that failed to do its job. This is not the county's job. City taxpayers are paying councilmen, who are spending our money to influence the administration that failed to do its job. This is not the council's job. And citizens are buying tee shirts, meeting, writing letters, and possibly hiring expensive lobbyists to influence politicians, who failed to do their job, which includes overseeing the well-paid VA administration that failed to do its job. Maybe this is the citizens' job, but they wouldn't have to do it if politicians did their jobs.

The bottom line?

Taxpayers are paying five times just because the VA administration failed to do its job and politicians failed to do their jobs.

Our politicians should demand, not ask "pretty please will you?" that the VA administration produce a report detailing a solid plan for the Hot Springs VA - one that shows specifically why the facility should be reduced, expanded, or kept as it is. It's stupid to waste taxpayer money - instead, political/administrative heads should roll.

Paul Nabholz

Hot Springs

[http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/opinion/paul-nabholz/article\\_1a10da9a-4b78-11e1-a864-001871e3ce6c.html](http://rapidcityjournal.com/hotspringsstar/opinion/paul-nabholz/article_1a10da9a-4b78-11e1-a864-001871e3ce6c.html)