

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

COMMITTEES:  
APPROPRIATIONS  
BUDGET  
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR  
AND PENSIONS  
RULES AND ADMINISTRATION  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS

May 31, 2007

The Honorable R. James Nicholson  
Secretary  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dr. Michael J. Kussman  
Under Secretary for Health  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Nicholson and Dr. Kussman:

I am writing to ask for your immediate intervention to address the needs of the mental health treatment, services and facility conditions within the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Puget Sound Health Care System. It recently came to my attention that the Joint Commission (formerly the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) issued a "Preliminary Denial of Accreditation" to the VA Puget Sound Health Care System after its audit in May. While I have not seen the report, I understand that the Joint Commission raised very serious concerns about inconsistencies in the suicide and homicide assessments of mental health patients, and the safety environment within the mental health inpatient wards. I understand that the Joint Commission found the problems to be significant enough to constitute an imminent threat to the safety of some patients.

The Joint Commission's decision is profoundly alarming and requires immediate action by the Department of Veterans Affairs. We cannot tolerate any veteran receiving less than the high-level of care they have rightfully earned through their service to this country.

It is my understanding that veterans who are at great risk of harm are specifically cited by the Joint Commission as receiving less than adequate care. It is disheartening and alarming that at a time when both the Department of Defense and VA are reporting that one-third of returning Iraq and Afghanistan service members are in need of mental health services, the VA in the Puget Sound area is not providing proper services and may be endangering veterans.

I also understand the Joint Commission findings included that the VA Puget Sound Health Care System suicide assessments are inadequate at a time when there is an increased risk of suicide among returning veterans.

Mr. Secretary, as you will recall on February 13, 2007, I raised with you the case of a Minnesota Marine who committed suicide after being denied care at a VA facility. I understand that after an internal review of the circumstances you have reevaluated the VA's procedures in regards to suicide assessment and communicating with patients. I am confident from our discussion of that incident that you are as frustrated as I am that the Joint Commission has again found fault in the suicide assessment procedures at a VA facility.

Given my understanding of the findings of the Joint Commission, I request your immediate and personal attention to the issues raised by the Joint Commission regarding mental health services within the VA Puget Sound Health Care System and to remedy this situation and prevent it from occurring in the future.

In order to better understand the situation and the impact on veterans in Washington state, I would like the following provided to me in regards to this situation:

- A personal assurance that the VA Puget Sound Health Care System will quickly implement each of the corrective steps outlined by the Joint Commission.
- A list of all the corrective steps the VA Puget Sound Health Care System has taken to date and a timetable of the additional steps still needed to be taken to earn full re-accreditation.
- A detailed explanation of the causes of the problems the Joint Commission outlined. Specifically addressing if inadequate staffing, increased demand for services, lack of training, funding, clear oversight or any other variables contributed to the Preliminary Denial of Accreditation.
- Information on whether the deficiencies cited by the Joint Commission were brought about by a specific lack of funding and if so what additional funding is necessary to ensure these problems do not reoccur.
- Information on Joint Commission accreditation statistics from VA facilities across this country to ensure that our national facilities are measuring up to the standards veterans deserve.

The VA's hardworking, professional employees provide some of the best care available in the U.S. and whenever that care falls short it needs to be addressed immediately. I look forward to hearing from you on the immediate steps you are taking to rectify this situation to ensure veterans in the Puget Sound are getting the care they need and deserve. I look forward to your prompt response to this matter and assurance that this is a momentary setback and that no effort will be spared in order to keep the VA Puget Sound Health Care System as a Joint Committee accredited facility.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray  
U.S. Senator

Cc: Dennis "Max" Lewis, Director, Veterans Integrated Service Network 20  
Alex Spector, Acting Director, Puget Sound Health Care System