

**Statement of Leslie M. Burger, MD, FACP, Director  
Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) #20  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs**

**Before the Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
United States Senate**

**April 12, 2004**

Madam Chairperson and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to appear before the Committee to discuss CARES as it pertains to the VAMC Walla Walla. I thank you for your continued strong support of veterans, not only in Washington state, but across the nation, and for conducting this hearing today. With me today is Mr. Bruce E. Stewart, Acting Director of the Walla Walla VA Medical Center.

As you know, Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) is the Department of Veterans Affairs' program to define the VA health care delivery system to meet veterans' needs for health care services over the next 20 years. It is a strategic planning process that considers the physical condition of our VA facilities, the technological advancements in how health care is delivered, and the projected changes in demographics and geographics of our veteran population.

Over the past several months, the CARES Commission visited our campuses in White City, OR, Vancouver and Walla Walla, WA, and held both informal and formal hearings at each site. The commission received literally thousands of documents from veterans and community leaders. I provided testimony at each of the formal hearings, and the information provided concerning the characteristics of our network and the demographics of the veterans it serves remains valid.

The Walla Walla VAMC service area includes 14 counties in Washington, Idaho, and Oregon, and three key veteran population centers of Yakima, Tri Cities and Walla Walla, where we currently have health care facilities. I want to say at the outset that the more than 300 employees and the many volunteers at the Walla Walla VA Medical Center are dedicated professionals who continue to provide outstanding quality care to their patients; and that the greater Walla Walla community has been a superb partner in that endeavor. Each and every time I visit the Walla Walla campus, I am impressed by the caring and sense of community patients and staff demonstrate. It is the veterans we serve who are uppermost in our minds as we proceed with the CARES process.

As you know, the CARES Commission Report to the Secretary, released on February 12<sup>th</sup> of this year, recommended closure of all services on the campus, including relocating outpatient services off the Walla Walla campus after relocation of inpatient services. The Commission was very careful to point out that the Secretary should not close any services

without first assuring that comparable services were available in the community. Secretary Principi has not yet announced his decision on any of the recommendations, however, he has stated that wherever services are earmarked for closure, it would only occur once adequate and quality alternative services have been identified and made available.

Two significant factors leading to all of the above recommendations were the physical condition of the current Walla Walla facility- many old buildings, some over 100 years old, that are costing increasing dollars to maintain, dollars that could better be spent on patient services- and the belief that comparable services in the three key population centers are available. The need for ambulatory care in Walla Walla is unchallenged, whether that care be provided on the current campus, or elsewhere in the community.

The Secretary, and all of us, are devoted to finding the best solution for providing south central and eastern Washington's veterans, and those veterans from the surrounding counties of Oregon and Idaho, the highest quality health care they have earned through their service to our nation; and we look forward to working with you and other members of Congress and our government to find that solution. That concludes my statement. I would be happy to answer any of your questions. Thank you.