

**Jerry Cummins, City Council Member
City of Walla Walla**

**United States Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs
Walla Walla Community College
April 12, 2004**

Senator Murray:

My name is Jerry Cummins and I am a member of the Walla Walla City Council and a retired veteran of the U.S. Navy. On behalf of Mayor Lugo and my colleagues on the City Council, I want to welcome and thank you for coming to Walla Walla.

I want to state for the record that my comments today reflect the position of the City Council. I have attached to my testimony a copy of Resolution No. 2003-75 and Resolution No. 2004-17 since they reflect the specific Council position. In addition, I have included my testimony delivered to the CARES Commission on September 29, 2003.

Walla Walla during the past 85 years has formed a partnership with the V.A. and the local community to build a model health care system for veterans. We believe the CARES process COULD have been an opportunity to renew and strengthen this partnership; instead, the CARES process has been the type of top down decision making that will harm our community and ignores our local willingness and ability to solve problems. During the CARES process:

- We have been told the V.A. medical care services will be contracted out with virtually no analysis of the impact on the community.
- We have been told services will be closed without a discussion and plan for the future for the 84 acre campus.
- We have been told that the buildings will be demolished, but the community might save them if local funding is available which is very unlikely during these unstable financial times.

It sounds like the City is being set up to clean up the Federal Government's mess. The community has been offered nothing in return.

The CARES process has not offered the local community the opportunity to help develop the plan. Even the actuarial assumptions regarding future needs have been withheld from us. **We are frustrated, upset, even angry, but we are not without hope.**

Our fore bearers worked hard to establish first the Fort Walla Walla facility and then the Veterans Care facility and we will continue to fight to keep the **Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center** in our city. After Fort Walla Walla closed in 1910, the Federal Government released the property to the Public Health Service for the development of a Veterans Hospital in 1921. The V.A. facility continues to be a great benefit for Walla Walla.

Walla Walla is a rural community and during these difficult economic times, the Federal Government has a responsibility to not abandon Walla Walla. Consider the impact closure would have on our community. The City of Walla Walla is just one of many local agencies and businesses which provide services or supplies to the V.A. Medical Center. The V.A. Medical Center pays the city about \$275,000 per year for ambulance services and we provide those services at a reduced V.A. rate. Any change in the facility's mission would seriously impact the city and other local agencies and businesses which currently serve the V.A. Medical Center.

Closure would mean up to 365 VA employees with an annual payroll of \$24 million would lose their jobs. The loss of this payroll would impact many local businesses.

Walla Walla reuses historic structures by funding restoration of old buildings so they can continue to serve the citizens. Walla Walla has a respect for our community's history and those who spent their time and effort to construct the VA facilities. The Federal Government has a responsibility to rehabilitate and maintain these facilities. Lack of investment in Walla Walla is evident and reflects poorly on V.A. management.

The Council believes that the existing site is not an efficient site for the delivery of health care services. The V.A. Medical Center property, provided there is a locally developed visionary plan, could be a benefit for the V.A. and the community's future economic vitality.

The **Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center** annually serves 12,000 patients from 14 counties in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. Elimination or relocation of outpatient, mental health or psychiatric services in Walla Walla will disrupt veterans' medical services and the ability to maintain contact with local family members.

The major problem with closing or contracting these services to other communities or V.A. facilities is the long travel distances. This will create unreasonable delays for those in need of care and require families to be separated from relatives.

On the map of the United States the distance from Walla Walla to Seattle, Washington is 282 miles which is about the same as from Washington, DC to Pittsburgh, or Washington, DC to Raleigh, NC.

If you were a veteran with medical needs and lived in New York City, would you really want to drive to Washington, DC (which is closer than Walla Walla is to Seattle) to receive care? Could your family afford to stay for an extended period of time in a hotel to remain close to you? These distances do not take into

consideration the availability of personal or public transportation. This is what the VA is asking our local veterans to do.

The City recommends the Federal Government build a new out-patient facility, a psychiatry care and mental health counseling center, a long term nursing care facility and a columbarium. The columbarium should be located where it can be included in the City's cemetery operation. Part of the funds for these facilities could come from an economically viable plan to reuse the existing site.

With encouragement from this Committee we can renew our partnership to provide great health care for veterans in Walla Walla. We have all of the necessary ingredients:

- a committed community;
- a V.A. staff who received the Carey Achievement award in both 1998 and 2001 for excellent medical service; and
- a community willing, with a little assistance, to design a redevelopment plan for the existing VA site.

I encourage elected legislators to intervene. What started out as a process to assist veterans has turned into a method of reducing services. Our veterans who gave to our great Nation deserve more.