

United States Senate Committee On Veterans' Affairs

**Senate Hearing
Monday, April 12, 2004
Walla Walla Community College
Walla Walla, Washington**

**Testimony of Jim Willis
Director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs**

Good Afternoon Senator Murray and thank you for your invitation to testify here today on these important issues. For the record, my name is Jim Willis and I am the Director of the Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs and work out of our headquarters office in Salem, Oregon, the State Capitol.

The key issue I wish to address today is the proposed closure of the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center as contained in the February 2004 CARES Commission report to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

I disagree with this recommendation for the following reasons:

1. The VA already owns this facility, which has an enviable record of quality service to the veteran communities of Northwestern Idaho, Central and Southeastern Washington and Central and Northeastern Oregon.
2. The cost to replicate the existing services of this facility through the proposed contracting for acute inpatient medicine, psychiatry and nursing home care in the Walla Walla geographic area could instead be used to update and maintain the existing facility.
3. The quality health care services by trained staff already exist and are familiar to the veteran communities currently served by this facility.

Should the VA Secretary accept the CARES Commissions recommendation to close this facility, then the only other option available would be to put the proposed contracted services in place using the standard of "as good as or better than" what is in place today through the Jonathan M. Wainwright Memorial VA Medical Center **prior** to the closure of the facility.

It is important to note that if this facility is closed, then veterans from Central and Northeastern Oregon are left with the following VA Medical Center alternatives:

1. Travel 160 miles to Spokane, Washington
2. Travel 250 miles to Portland, Oregon

3. Travel 310 miles to Seattle, Washington

Not only is this travel difficult for these veterans, during the winter or during inclement weather, it is often not even an option meaning that **they will receive no treatment at all.**

It seems to us living in the Pacific Northwest that often when those living on the Eastern Seaboard who makes these decisions that there is a failure to understand the distances involved in our travel. On the Eastern Seaboard, to travel somewhere between 160 and 310 miles could involve traveling through several states and could put a veteran in touch with any number of VA Medical Centers. That is simply not true here in the Northwest and is another reason to maintain this valuable facility.

Let me tell you just one story about the Walla Walla Center and an Oregon veteran.

David is a fairly young veteran of the United States Marine Corps. He is 100% service connected disabled. The Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs was appointed as his conservator in 1988. David has resided in the Pendleton, Walla Walla and Milton-Freewater areas since 1990.

David has had multiple hospitalizations at the Walla Walla VAMC. He goes there when he decompensates and needs to get stabilized on his medications. He also goes there for the "day treatment" program occasionally. And he goes there for this routine visits for medical and mental health care.

Last year it was suspected that his care provider was no longer providing for his needs. So with the coordinated efforts of the VA Field Examiner out of the Seattle VARO and the staff at Walla Walla VAMC, (the social worker, the doctor and other medical staff) the situation was investigated and David was relocated into a foster home that suited his needs.

Without the intervention of the Walla Walla VAMC medical staff, it is safe to say that David would once again be living on the streets and could have been a potential crime victim. He could also have become a recipient of charitable or state health services at an unnecessary cost due to his veteran eligibility.

In closing let me say that sadly, our country finds itself at a point in our history where we are welcoming home a whole new generation of veterans as a result of our Global War on Terrorism. These veterans expect, have been promised and deserve the same level of care provided to those who have gone before them. To do less would be a betrayal of the worst order, while to maintain our promise to these veterans would be in keeping with the best virtues and public policy of our nation.

Senator Murray, it is fair to say that I urge this committee along with the rest of the members of the Congress of the United States to consider the impact of this proposed decision on the veterans of this area and work with us to keep this valuable facility open for the foreseeable future in service to these deserving veterans.

I would also like to use the opportunity to urge this committee and the members of the United States Congress to adopt mandated funding of the VA Health Care program to avoid the year-to-year battles for reallocation of the funds necessary to maintain the promise of this nation to care for those who have borne the battle.

Thank you again for the opportunity. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.