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September 28, 2007

Gordon H. Mansfield
Acting Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Mansfield:

I write to express my views in regard to the Boston Area Study of the VA CARES Commission and the future of Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers in the VA Boston Health Care System.

The most recent public hearing of the CARES Local Advisory Panel on September 17, 2007, highlighted the four remaining business plan options still being considered by the Commission. In arriving at those options, the VA and PricewaterhouseCoopers established six criteria: healthcare access, healthcare quality, impact on VA and local community, cost effectiveness, ease of implementation, and wider VA program support.

Three out of the four options would not fulfill the criteria established by the Commission, unless the goal is to consolidate medical centers and sacrifice veterans' health care in order to cut costs. It is puzzling to decipher how the closing of the Bedford campus and the consolidation of either West Roxbury or Jamaica Plain into the other enhances the quality of care or makes it easier for local veterans to access it.

The Massachusetts Congressional Delegation has been clear and unequivocal throughout the CARES process that the medical centers in Eastern Massachusetts must be maintained and renovated where appropriate. Closing one, two or even all four -- as had been studied for a while in the last year -- will not serve the needs of our veterans. Our population's needs are growing as they age and tens of thousands of new veterans are being created in Iraq and Afghanistan every year, with acute health care needs including PTSD and traumatic brain injury. When one factors in the statement made by one of the Local Advisory Panel members during the last public hearing that Category 8 veterans are not even being factored into the discussion of veteran population numbers, one begins to understand how skewed statistics can become. When the Category 8 moratorium that was unfairly imposed in January of 2003 is finally lifted, the VA will be hard

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pressed to address the health care needs of the tens of thousands of these veterans, especially if one or more medical center campuses are consolidated or shuttered.

If the Commission is truly concerned about the enhancement of access to VA health care, then one need only look at the lack of VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic in the town of Plymouth, MA. There, "cost effectiveness" in 2001 resulted in the shuttering of a clinic within days of its opening. VA itself had made the decision to open a CBOC in one of Massachusetts' fastest growing areas only to have it scuttled due to budgetary pressures.

I applaud the leadership and long time support for this concept of locally based health care from Dr. Jeanette Chirico Post and her staff at Veterans Integrated Service Network I. In addition, I was heartened to hear that several members of the Local Advisory Panel stated in response to comments from veterans stakeholders that a CBOC in Plymouth should be a part of any business plan for the region.

A clinic in Plymouth not only obviates the need for travel to the larger medical centers for routine care, but also enrolls an ever greater number of veterans into the system, thereby ensuring that New England receives its fair share under the VERA system. The success of the established Quincy, Hyannis, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard clinics has clearly demonstrated the VA's commitment to provide quality care to this aging and increasingly less mobile population.

I cannot support any proposal that will reduce health care services or access to health care for our veterans. The men and women serving America across the globe have made so many sacrifices already. To have access to the very best health care when they return is their right. Adopting any recommendation other than Option 1 will result in decreased access to care. This is simply unacceptable. I therefore strongly urge you to adopt the baseline recommendation and ensure that veterans in Massachusetts will continue to be able to access the quality VA health care they have earned by virtue of their service to America.

Thank you for your attention and I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,

William D. Delahunt