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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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VA Subverts Healthcare Options

by Johnnie Walker, Cape May County, New Jersey; 15 May 2015

In recent months, there have been many letters, articles and columns written about the ineptitude of the Veterans Administration health system. We all have heard about the months-long delays for appointments. We have learned of the fraud that has been perpetuated in many VA hospitals. Officials have covered up their inefficiency and outright apathy for the veterans in their care by falsifying documents and lying to investigators.

Locally, the bigger concern has been the effort to give veterans in Cape May County the option to get health care services at the fine hospitals right here in South Jersey rather than force them to travel to the VA hospitals in Philadelphia and Wilmington. We at Citizens Veterans Advisory Committee thought this had been resolved when the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act was passed last year.

The act was supposed to allow veterans to use local health care providers if they lived more than 40 miles from a VA hospital. However, the VA has interpreted the act to allow veterans this option only if they live more than 40 miles from *any* facility run by the VA. So, since there are three VA clinics within 40 miles of most Cape May County veterans, they have no choice — even though these clinics don't offer the services that many local veterans need!

Locally, this ridiculous rule is having a truly detrimental effect. One veteran living in Lower Township requires radiation five days a week for nine weeks. Although Cape Regional and others offer this type of treatment, he must use the VA. He travels via the Disabled American Veterans van every Monday to Wilmington, not for treatment but to check in to the hospital with which he is registered. He then takes a VA van to Philadelphia for his treatment.

After treatment, which lasts only 13 minutes, he is housed at a Philadelphia hotel. Tuesday through Friday, he is picked up by cab each day and taken for his treatment. His housing and meal expenses are covered by the VA. On Friday, he returns to his home. On Monday morning, this circus of waste and incompetence begins anew.

This veteran will likely lose his job as he has used up all his sick and vacation time in order to get this life-saving treatment. This is a flesh-and-blood example of a man who fought for his country — living in our little corner of the world — being mistreated and neglected by the system that was supposed to help and support him in exchange for his service. He deserves to be treated with decency, respect and a degree of common sense by the VA and he isn't. It's shameful.

From a taxpayer's perspective, how can this make economic sense? This also is shameful.

So why is this happening? Why are the billions of dollars in additional funding given to the VA to enact services for Choice Card holders not being spent? Why aren't they putting the needs of the patients they serve first? I'm afraid the answer boils down to old-fashioned territorialism. The VA system is a monolithic entity with a \$56 billion budget. Officials don't want to change. They know that given the option, many of those who rely upon this shoddy service will go elsewhere.

A recent report noted that up to 80 percent of those veterans who have received the Choice Card have been denied services when they attempted to use non-VA services. In another report, VA officials have been unable to get hospital staff to adopt the new rules because they simply refuse to do so. Apparently, if you work for the VA, you can refuse a direct order from a superior and still keep your job. If the veterans they serve refused an order during active duty, they'd be thrown in jail!

This system has to be fixed now! Local health care facilities want to provide these services, but when they approach the VA for approval, they are stonewalled. We have been told that VA officials don't return calls or reply to their correspondence with regard to the Choice Program. If they wanted to, the VA could reimburse the local health care providers for these much needed services. Instead they prefer to waste thousands on hotel bills and transportation for our local vet, and others like him. They ignore the more humane and cost-effective solution to protect their kingdom.

Write your congressmen; speak up. Do not allow this sham service to continue.

Johnnie Walker is chairperson of the Citizens Veterans Advisory Committee.