



STATEMENT
of
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President and CEO
on behalf of
The American Health Care Association
&
The National Center for Assisted Living

before the
Senate Special Committee on Aging
Hearing
on
“Veterans’ Health: Ensuring Care for Our Aging Heroes”

October 3, 2007

On behalf of the American Health Care Association (AHCA) and the National Center for Assisted Living (NCAL), I thank you, Senator Smith as the Ranking Member, for calling this hearing on ensuring that our “Aging Heroes,” receive the best quality care our nation has to offer. AHCA/NCAL also thanks Chairman Kohl and the entire Committee for recognizing the growing health needs of America’s veterans as well as for seeking to optimize the quality of their care in the face of substantial budget and demographic challenges.

AHCA/NCAL welcomes the insights of the Paralyzed Veterans of America and the other witnesses today who are here to add their unique and valuable perspectives. We fully appreciate that the resources and capacity of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) may already be stretched to the maximum, particularly given the rising number of veterans who—along with the rest of the baby boomers—are approaching the age of 65 and who are seeking to access VA health care services.

Given the existing burden on VA resources, and the type of injuries American troops are sustaining in Iraq and Afghanistan, we can only imagine that the need for skilled nursing and rehabilitative care will increase. It is from this standpoint, Mr. Chairman, that we again offer our support in assisting the VA in achieving its vital mission. Our nation’s community nursing homes (CNHs) stand ready to shore up the VA’s surge capacity and ability to meet the long term care needs of our nation’s veterans.

CNHs are a vital component of the VA long term care system. While VA medical facilities often care for residents with high acuity levels, CNHs are an excellent choice for veterans whose acuity does not warrant placement in a VA facility, but who cannot be appropriately cared for in a home health setting. As well, community nursing homes may be the best choice for veterans who would be far from their families if placed in a state VA medical facility, or state veterans nursing home.

In 2006, more than 13% of all veterans receiving skilled nursing care were treated in CNHs. That percentage is expected to increase as the VA focuses on long term care that offers the “best setting for the [veteran] . . . and providing that care closer to where the veteran lives.”

With a skilled nursing facility in almost every county in the nation, AHCA/NCAL remains ready, willing, and able to support the VA in its efforts to provide high quality, clinically-appropriate long term care to our nation’s veterans through CNH placements. By 2012, there are expected to be approximately 1.3 million veterans over 85 years of age; so it is imperative that we work together to ensure that all seniors—veterans and civilians alike—receive the best possible care.

AHCA/NCAL applauds the VA's recent efforts to promote a little-known supplemental benefit called Aid & Attendance (A&A), which can help veterans and their surviving spouses cover the cost of assisted living and nursing facility services. We recently conferred with VA officials about A&A and are working with both the VA and provider community to help veterans understand and access this benefit.

We also would like to mention that the ongoing nursing workforce shortage is a serious concern that could negatively impact our ability to serve veterans and others in need of long term care. So that we do not compete for the shrinking pool of qualified workers who serve as the backbone of our nation’s long term care system, we strongly encourage a fundamental reevaluation of certain aspects of the *Veteran’s Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act of 1999* that established new standards for evaluating a state’s need for constructing new facilities for veterans.

Specifically, the methodology for establishing the need for new veterans’ beds does not take into account the number of available community nursing home beds in each state – beds immediately available, and which may be far closer to home. CNHs provide the option to veterans of living closer to family while still receiving the health care services they need for optimal functioning from the VA. As we all know, proximity to loved ones is critical in maintaining quality of life for any nursing home resident.

For the record, Mr. Chairman, AHCA does not discourage funding improvements to veterans’ homes. Nevertheless, we ask that prior to appropriating millions in construction costs for additional facilities, the VA should first work to determine whether there are existing facilities in proximity to proposed new VA homes that could otherwise provide high quality care. In an era of limited resources, especially at the VA, we should as a matter of prudent public policy work to provide care in homes that currently exist, rather than construct new facilities that would compete for staff and thereby weaken our nation’s entire long term care infrastructure.

In closing, AHCA/NCAL looks forward to working with this Committee and the VA in examining these issues in greater detail. Our members are proud to serve America's 'aging heroes' in their time of need. Thank you again, Chairman Kohl, Senator Smith, and members of this Committee, for holding this important hearing. With our nation's service members and veterans in the national and international spotlight, our concern for their care and safety today as well as tomorrow has never been more important to the soul and conscience of the American people. They deserve the best we have to offer.