



NCOA

Non Commissioned Officers Association of the United States of America

225 N. Washington

Alexandria, Virginia 22314

Telephone (703) 549-0311

STATEMENT

OF

**RICHARD C. SCHNEIDER
DIRECTOR OF VETERANS AND STATE AFFAIRS**

Submitted to

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ON

**VA's Ability to Respond to DoD Contingencies
and National Emergencies**

October 15, 2001

DISCLOSURE OF FEDERAL GRANTS AND CONTRACTS

The Non Commissioned Officer Association of the USA (NCOA) does not currently receive, nor has the Association ever received, any federal money for grants or contracts. All of the Association's activities and services are accomplished completely free of any federal funding.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman and distinguished Members of the Committee:

The Non Commissioned Officers Association of the USA (NCOA) believes your review of the Department of Veterans Affairs Ability to Respond to DoD Contingencies and National Emergencies is extremely relevant in view the September 11th Terrorist Attack on America. The days that have passed since September 11th have sensitized the American people to man made disasters beyond comprehension.

NCOA is appreciative of the opportunity to submit its perspective for the record on VA's ability to respond to DoD operations and National Emergencies.

The Association's membership is exclusive in its representation of enlisted personnel of Active, Reserve, and Guard Service Components, the USCG, military retirees and veterans. The significant ratio of enlisted personnel to military officers who have served in the Armed Forces quickly translates to the fact that the majority of veterans who would benefit from VA medical care in this eventuality would be current or former enlisted Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and members of the Coast Guard. NCOA is strongly committed to the issue of preparedness of the VA to meet readiness obligations to ensure the war fighting and sustainability of military forces. Likewise, the Association believes that the Department of Veterans Affairs is uniquely qualified and should be on the front line in the preparation, management and execution of any and all National Emergencies.

Today, the sons and daughters of America serving in the Armed Forces, the United States Coast Guard, and all Reserve, or Guard Components prepare again to answer the clarion call to duty. The call to duty has already placed many in harm's way and will require sacrifice and place hardship on all service members and their families alike.

BACKGROUND

The Nation was thrust into a new concept war on September 11th when terrorists attacked America and its citizens targeting civilian locations. The terrorists' acts of aggression and destruction have indelibly redefined the concept of war for the world in the 21st Century. The people of America supported the President in his declaration of war on terrorists and any country that offers them safe harbor. Hence the "call up" of Reserve and Guard personnel as military forces are being deployed to counter the worldwide threat including locations in cities, shipping corridors and airports in the United States. NCOA communicated its steadfast support to The President in his determination to seek justice for all victims of terrorism. A copy of the correspondence from NCOA to the President is attached.

News reporting and continuous live coverage of the events in New York, Washington DC, and Pennsylvania has vividly communicated the nation's response to the unfolding events. That all Americans have been sensitized is evident by people responding with financial

contributions, providing food and clothing, and expressing personal grief for unknown citizens who were victims of the terrorist attacks.

The Nation has been further sensitized or perhaps traumatized to the terrorist reality by both the President and Federal Bureau of Investigation warnings that additional terrorist activities are to be expected. Citizens have received the message to remain vigilant to strangers, activities, and things that appear out of the ordinary. Concurrently, the President has encouraged people to return to “normal” activities, continue with vacation plans, not to hesitate to fly, take planned shopping trips, and help America in a period of time characterized by:

- A continued threat to life and property
- Declining economy
- Job losses and high unemployment
- Citizens traumatized by events
- Perception of America becoming an armed camp
- Ongoing news and talk show hosts running commentaries on terrorism
- Sense of foreboding and doom

Additionally, a Presidential Executive Order established the Office of Homeland Security and chartered a Homeland Security Council to develop and coordinate a comprehensive national strategy to strengthen protections against terrorist threats or attacks in the United States. Citizens are advised that this new function will coordinate federal, state, and local counter-terrorism efforts.

COMMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS;

1. Emergency Medical Back Up to the DoD

The Office of Emergency Medical Preparedness, VAMC Martinsburg, WV serves as the point of contact for DoD Contingencies and is involved in the planning and preparedness for VA medical services required to support the DoD Mission. That office has access to information, classified and unclassified, and likewise communication capabilities to actively exercise its role in support of DoD contingencies to manage the medical care and distribution of military wounded.

Planning and Communication are key to providing the required hospital beds and distribution of patients for needed medical expertise. The migration of the Veteran Health Administration medical delivery system from an inpatient to an outpatient primary care system raises the ageless questions that are continuously reviewed and must always be confronted when military forces are placed in harm’s way:

Are there sufficient VA bed spaces, medical staff, and equipment to convert unused wards for mass casualties?

Are there air transportation hubs and ground-access areas available in the needed communities for the movement of patients?

How will mobilization impact availability of either VA medical staff or contract physicians/nurses?

Will any needed medical specialty capability be lost due to military deployment?

Are medical vehicles available in the required communities to transport mass casualties?

The communication capability that exists between the VA and its health care facilities can provide 7 x 24 real time information for VA and VHA leadership to make decisions to aggressively respond to DoD requirements.

Recommendations:

Continued leadership review of the Office of Emergency Medical Preparedness and its planning function.

Ensure adequate funds are budgeted to stockpile medical equipment and supplies, and upgrades for redundant processes to include alternate VA command and control facilities, communication technology, and medical hot sites.

Ensure highest level of technology and back up systems for communication with DoD and air transport centers.

Ensure medical triage information for the correct distribution of mass casualties to treatment centers where specialty service is available.

Actively participate in planning exercises with the military to ensure a current and viable DoD contingency mission.

2. VA Ability to Respond to National Emergencies:

VA has historically responded well to all types of natural disasters in America.

The terrorist attack on America raised significant issues for America and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Initially described as a terrorist war, the national role of VA in the immediate aftermath of the crisis appeared to be in question and perhaps even nonexistent. Internally, the Department of Veterans Affairs communicated leadership direction and involvement of local VA Medical Centers and Vet Center personnel in the adjacent areas of the disasters. It also aggressively directed the immediate involvement of the Veterans Benefits Administration to facilitate the death and burial benefits of veteran victims.

Lacking in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th event was the programmatic role of the Federal Agencies. Most notably missing was the Department of Veterans Affairs as

the Nation's premier health care provider in response to such disasters. It appeared that DoD, The Department of Health and Human Services, FEMA and other agencies had their roles being defined and action directed in response as events unfolded on September 11. In fact, the Governors of the impacted states (New York, Virginia, Pennsylvania and the Mayor of the District of Columbia) were actively involved in the process.

That the Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services had an aggressive leadership role seems inexplicable when you consider the Department as a health care policymaker lacking resources to be an emergency health care provider. Undoubtedly, there is an obvious role for HHS in such emergencies but certainly not as an agency capable of delivering health care services or to provide intervention for those suffering from post-traumatic stress.

The Department of Veterans Affairs in the past years has dealt with the concept of terrorism as it relates to medical care. In fact, in the week prior to September 11, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs responded to a General Accounting Office report on a matter dealing with terrorism. That response was related to one of six (6) such GAO reports relating to the readiness of federal agencies relative to terrorism in the preceding two years. VA had already begun to train its medical personnel on intervention and care techniques to terrorism involving casualties resulting from the utilization of chemical, biological, or nuclear agents.

The President's immediate appointment of a new Cabinet Office as Office of Homeland Security and charter of a Homeland Security Council was an excellent action in response to what has become known as the Terrorist War on America. NCOA regrets however that the formal statements sanctioning this new office and council did not reflect the Secretary of Veterans Affairs as a named participant in this initiative. The chartering statements allow for the appointment of others determined to be possibly appropriate for inclusion in this initiative. The Association believes only the Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs has the nationwide medical delivery service able to respond to either provide direct care or augment community resources in response to future terrorist actions.

Recommendations:

NOTED: That the Secretary of Veterans Affairs has already sanctioned a departmental disaster preparedness work group and that a tentative report is already being reviewed.

That VA be assigned a national leadership role in assignments of the Office of Homeland Security and Homeland Security Council for the formulation of policy, planning, and implementation for the coordinated federal delivery of community health care services in response to terrorist activities.

That resources be budgeted for the VA to stockpile caches of medical equipment, pharmaceuticals, and supplies to respond to nationwide terrorist activities. Likewise, that VA's budget include provision for protective clothing, equipment, communication technologies, decontamination and facility modifications to provide control for the care of victims of nuclear, biological, or chemical attacks.

VA should be considered a national resource in the training of community medical personnel in their preparation to management contingencies related to terrorism. Federal leadership and involvement by a number of agencies in such programs is key to a successful unified community response to an actual event.

VA health care professionals should be a part of DoD mass casualty exercises. It is readily apparent that the joined medical response to terrorism of DoD and VA would best serve America. Further, VHA could provide the continuity of such responses should existing military medical resources be deployed or otherwise not available.

CONCLUSION

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the House Veterans Committee for recognizing the need to address this special subject dealing with VA's ability to exercise its DoD Contingency Mission and the role of the Department in responding to national emergencies.

NCOA believes that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and the diverse program resources of that Department must be a part of any national program that responds to major natural disasters or emergencies. It is inconceivable that a federal agency the scope and size of the Department of Veterans Affairs would not be at the national planning table ensuring the readiness of America to respond to any such event.

Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY

of

Richard C. Schneider Director of Veterans and State Affairs

Mr. Schneider is the National Director of State/Veterans Affairs, Non Commissioned Officers Association of the United States of America. His responsibilities include executive management of all NCOA programs that support America's veterans. These include service transition, employment, benefit rights and adjudication processes. He directs 473 NCOA Veteran Service Officers located in the United States and overseas. Additionally, he provides legislative focus for 46 NCOA State Legislative Coordinators, which represent NCOA in State Legislative Affairs. Mr. Schneider concurrently serves as the Executive Director of the NCOA National Defense Foundation. In this capacity, he is responsible for the Association's Voter Registration Program including the operation of the National Voter Registration and Information Center in cooperation with the Department of Defense. He also manages NCOA Operation Appreciation, which provides grants to benefit hospitalized veterans and other association determined humanitarian outreaches.

Mr. Schneider was born in New Jersey. He was raised in the Garden State attending elementary and secondary schools in Lyndhurst. He has a Bachelor of Science from the University of Southern Colorado (1972) and a Master of Arts from the University of Northern Colorado (1974).

He served in the United States Air Force from August 1957 to September 1990. Mr. Schneider retired in the grade of Chief Master Sergeant. He held significant assignments in management and personnel planning throughout his military career. His military decorations include the Legion of Merit, the Meritorious Service Medal with two Oak Leaf Clusters and the Air Force Commendation Medal with four Oak Leaf Clusters.

He is currently the Secretary, Board of Directors, Pentagon Federal Credit Union, Alexandria, VA. He also is currently the Chairman of the Board, Financial Technologies, Inc., Chantilly, VA.

Mr. Schneider is married to the former Anne Ferguson of Prestwick, Ayrshire, Scotland. They have four children: three daughters, Kristin, Leslie, and Fiona; and a son, Richard.