

**Statement of
John J. Michalski, Commander
The American Legion Department of Indiana**

**Before
The US House of Representatives'
Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigation**

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Indianapolis, Indiana**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee...

Thank you for the opportunity to present the views of The American Legion Department of Indiana on quality of care and management issues at the Indianapolis VA Medical Center ... and on claims processing issues at the Indianapolis Regional Office.

Our organization recognizes and appreciates the efforts of this committee, the VA, and Congress to substantially improve the quality and access to medical care of veterans over the past several years. Since enactment of Public Law 104-262 – the Veterans Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996 – veterans in all seven eligibility categories have been entitled to a full and comprehensive package of health care services from VA Medical Centers.

The Indianapolis VA Medical Center is a prime example of excellent delivery of services by the VA. It provides a full range of health care services and does so in a friendly and courteous manner. We rarely receive complaints concerning the quality of its services.

However, we do have one significant local concern: A few years ago, The American Legion Department of Indiana chose not to oppose VA's plan to close the Cold Springs Road VA facility here in Indianapolis. That facility provided long-term nursing home care, and care for mental health patients. The VA had entered into an agreement with the State of Indiana, which provided for the State to either lease or purchase the Cold Springs Road facility ... and consequently, to use the proceeds of the sale or lease to expand services – particularly nursing home care services -- at the remaining VA Medical facility here in Indianapolis.

This apparent win-win situation would benefit the VA by relieving it of the burden of maintaining two VA medical facilities ... and nursing home and mental health patients by providing direct access to physical medical care without having to endure a transfer between hospitals.

Nevertheless, several years now have passed and there has been no expansion of services for nursing home patients and mental health patients at the remaining VA Medical facility here. We know that the original agreement -- which the Indiana American Legion supported in good faith -- netted the Indianapolis VA Medical Center approximately three million dollars. That money has not been used and has since increased to about 3.3 million dollars.

We also understand that this area's Veterans Integrated Service Network -- No. 11 -- is facing a deficit in excess of 30 million dollars. It is our concern that the VISN may attempt to reduce its budget deficit by attaching the 3.3 million dollars meant for local veterans. Those veterans have already given up an entire VA medical facility for unfulfilled promises.

Beyond the initial three million dollars, the VA medical care system no doubt has saved millions more in recurring expenses that they have not had to meet. VA should apply the original proceeds toward meeting its commitment to local veterans, and expand nursing home and mental health services at the remaining VA medical facility here.

Despite this concern, we do acknowledge that one huge improvement in the system has been the expansion of the Outpatient system. However, the inconsistency from one outpatient clinic to another is very apparent. We were told once a patient was in the system, any outpatient clinic would be accessible and this is not true.

In Secretary Principi's speech to The American Legion National Convention in San Antonio, he mentioned the organization of teams to clear up old claims. This is commendable, but what is being done to see that the age-old problem of claims is being rectified?

One might think that the Veterans Benefits Administration can do nothing right. Complaints are everywhere:

- Some say the VBA first provides too little information about a decision – then it provides too much.
- Some say the VA should make a decision quickly without waiting for so much evidence, while other complain that the VA made a decision on their cases without assisting enough in helping them find evidence – which the VA is now mandated by law to do.
- Some say that VA employees lack proper training; other say VA can get nothing done because VA employees are always in training.
- Some complain that VA letters contain too little information; others say VA letters are too confusing because they contain too much information.

Obviously, both sides of these issues cannot be right. But it does clearly demonstrate that the claims process is poorly understood by most veterans.

Locally, we understand the VA Regional Office has hired more VBA employees. This is long past due. When the VA Regional Office decides to work on improving one area of claims processing, such as, new claims, it fall behind in working other areas of its responsibilities, such as, the processing of appealed cases.

We only hope that VA will properly train its new employees, see them as a long term investment in America's veteran, and avoid the temptation to discharge more experienced VBA employees with buy outs.

The American Legion Department of Indiana encourages the VA to continue to work on this area.

Ladies and Gentlemen, that concludes my testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about our views.

Thank you.