

TESTIMONY BY THE HONORABLE SOLOMON P. ORTIZ
REGARDING: HR 2307
BEFORE THE HOUSE VETERANS COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH
June 11, 2003

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about an issue that has been a passion for me since my election to Congress 21 years ago: the quality of the services we provide for our veteran population around the nation, but particularly in South Texas.

Each Congress for those 21 years, I have pursued legislation to put a veterans hospital in the South Texas area, which is home to 94,000 veterans of United States wars.

I have worked with the Department of Veterans Affairs for a long time to bring improved services to the long-ignored, veteran population living in the tip of Texas, and the VA has been somewhat responsive with their approach through the CARES program. It is long overdue for the VA to look seriously at the long term needs and service delivery for the all-important population they serve.

CARES data identifies the Rio Grande Valley-Coastal Bend market as one of the most underserved markets in terms of access to inpatient care for the 40,000 veterans residing in South Texas. CARES mandates that inpatient care be available with a 60 minute drive for urban areas and 90 minutes for rural areas. In this market, inpatient care is only available for sick and infirmed veterans in San Antonio, over 2.5 to 6 hours away from South Texas.

The Coastal Bend Valley market was identified as a group of counties containing a number of small to medium sized cities all of which are too remote in terms of travel time and distance to meet CARES access standards for secondary care. There are **presently no inpatient services in this market** other than a limited contract in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and limited access to specialty care. Patients must now travel to San Antonio (2.5 - 6 hrs) for most type of secondary care.

Opportunities to reduce this access gap exist through working with DoD in Corpus Christi as well as the University of Texas Regional Health Academic Center and its affiliated Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen. Two sub-markets were identified: Coastal Bend (Corpus Christi and surrounding area) and Rio Grande Valley (Brownsville, Harlingen and surrounding areas) because transportation between these areas is difficult involving secondary roads which take considerable travel time.

I thank my friend, the co-sponsor of this bill, Dave Hobson, who has been a champion for our veterans and their interests, both in Ohio and in South Texas, and around the nation.

I thank the subcommittee today for moving our bill forward so quickly – as you know, this is an issue that just cannot continue to wait ... we owe our veterans nothing less than state of the art health care that is available near where they live.