For more information, contact: Audry Ricketts (South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs) at 605-773-8242 or audry.ricketts@state.sd.us

SDDVA Secretary Whitlock’s March Column – Call for Action – We Need to Hear from Our Veterans!

Recently, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released its health care facility recommendations to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) Commission. These proposals are the first step in a multi-year process. Under the law, all VA proposals are required to be reviewed by the Commission, the President, and Congress.

In 2018, the VA MISSION Act was signed into law. Among its many provisions, the law instructed the VA to review all health care facilities in its nationwide network. It also required the VA to make recommendations for proposed changes to the AIR Commission.

For South Dakota, the report shows the following proposals for the east river footprint: reduce emergency room capacity to urgent care in Sioux Falls, continue expansion of outpatient services, add 30 nursing home beds, and close the Wagner community-based outpatient clinic. For the VA west river footprint, the recommendation is to add a new VA Medical Center and Community Living Center in Rapid City, relocate psychosocial rehab from Hot Springs to Rapid City, change existing Hot Springs and Fort Meade campuses to out-patient care only, and relocate all Hot Springs and Fort Meade in-patient services to Rapid City.

Here is the timeline moving forward: the Commission will review the report, hold hearings, and submit their recommendations to the President. The President will review and approve/disapprove and submit the findings to Congress, which will have 45 days to respond. If approved, the VA will have to begin implementing the recommendations.

Some things that concern the South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs include: would veterans be forced to rely on uncoordinated, private, for-profit care? Would veterans face long wait times for care? Would veterans be without the unique expertise and integrated services that only the VA provides? Would veterans pay more out-of-pocket expenses? Would providers wait months for reimbursement from the VA?

Our veterans faced many challenges while serving our country – hostile environments, exposure to toxins, intense heat and cold, dehydration, sandstorms, sleep deprivation, lengthy deployments, multiple deployments, survivor’s guilt, missing family milestones, and more.

(continued)
Our veterans wrote a blank check made payable to “The United States of America,” for an amount up to and including their life. They fought our wars, defended our freedoms, and protected our way of life. Let’s make sure we are fighting for them and protecting their way of life. It is our nation’s solemn obligation to provide veterans the health care, services and support they have earned.

Before Congress and the President implement any recommended changes to VA medical services, we need to make sure these changes are in the best interest of our veterans and their families. Cost should not be the factor.

That’s why we need to hear from our veterans about their thoughts, wishes, and needs for medical care. Are we as a country meeting those needs?

We ask that you share your thoughts by writing us at:
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs
425 E. Capitol
Pierre, SD 57501

Or, by emailing us a message. Go to our website: https://vetaffairs.sd.gov/aboutsddva/contactus.aspx#general, and scroll down to general inquiries and click on the email button on the right side.

At the end of each day, our true measure of success will be the timeliness, the quality, and the consistency of the services provided to our veterans. They deserve nothing less.

To all those who have faithfully served, we thank you!

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

-30-