DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH
WASHINGTON DC 20420

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To: All VHA Employees

I am writing to update you on one of the most important programs VA has undertaken this decade. Called CARES – it is a process designed to enable the veterans health care system to more effectively use its resources to deliver more care, to more veterans, in places where veterans need it most.

Make no mistake how important it is. VHA has more than 4,700 buildings and over 18,000 acres of land. But the very heart of VA is not in its infrastructure, it's in the veterans we serve. Some of the buildings and land VA owns are not well suited to veterans' health care needs. Many are underused or vacant, some are aging and in dire need of repair, others simply aren't where veterans need them.

In 1999, the General Accounting Office testified that VA was expending up to $1 million a day on underused or vacant space – that is $1 million a day that could be better spent providing health care services to veterans. They are not the only group looking to CARES for solutions. The Congress, the Office of Management and Budget, veterans service organizations, and other stakeholders are all looking to CARES to provide a framework for the future of VA health care that is fair, based on consistent data, and identifies not only areas of expansion, but also of opportunities to better use existing resources.

As a part of a multi-step process that started a year ago, 20 Networks recently submitted what are called draft Market Plans to me for thorough review. These draft Market Plans were the Networks' and facilities' recommendations for local changes and improvements, based on data that projected veteran population in the next two decades. It is now my responsibility to take these plans and incorporate them into the Draft National CARES Plan.

The current review process was built into the CARES planning cycle as a deliberate step to assure a national perspective and produce a consistent, systematic response, a sharing of best practices and good solutions, and equity and balance in the final report. Your Network plans are now undergoing this review by the CARES program office, national veterans service organizations, DoD representatives, teams made up of headquarters and field employees, and a special Clinical Work Group.

All of these groups are reporting to me on their progress. Over the course of these reviews, we often went back to the Networks to request more in-depth information. In some cases, we asked that additional options be considered. This was done to ensure not only that Network Market Plans meet all required CARES criteria, but also that, in aggregate, they describe the best overall national program to serve veterans for the future of the VA health care system.

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This step was originally scheduled to take six weeks. Over the course of the review, we learned that it would take longer to produce a comprehensive national review of the proposed VISN CARES plans. Secretary Principi agrees. In a recent memo to me, he wrote, "it is clear to me that the current CARES timetable does not allot sufficient time for the national-level review and adjustments you must make to the VISN plans before they are passed on the CARES Commission for their review. I recognize that I insisted on a very tight schedule for every point in the process. But after evaluating our progress, I believe it is more important that your recommendations to me to be informed by your assessment of opportunities . . . rather than rigid adherence to the schedule."

Though CARES has encountered this delay, it continues to move forward with full vigor. Last month, I asked Network Directors for more information that I needed to make the best decisions possible to accomplish the overriding goal of CARES – providing the best future health care possible for veterans across the nation.

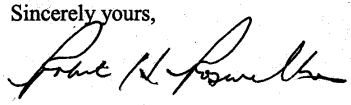
As we continue with this first review of CARES from a national perspective, you may hear rumors and speculation. That is a natural reaction to potential change. However, I encourage you to engage in the process rather than to broaden the speculation. Keep informed through local and national channels, ask questions, speak to your colleagues, visit the CARES web site at www.va.gov/CARES, and know that this National review has one clear charge, to create a brighter future for VA health care by making better use of resources to provide more effective health care for our nation's veterans.

This CARES review is still an interim step. After I submit the Draft National CARES Plan to the Secretary, it will be thoroughly vetted through the CARES Commission and then presented to the Secretary for final decision.

Change is never easy, but is often necessary to produce healthy improvements. In places where change is recommended, I commit to you that we will do everything possible to make future transitions as painless as possible for you, our employees, and that no veteran who depends on us will go without health care.

It is my duty to produce a national plan that describes the brightest future for VA health care. We owe that to our veterans.

Sincerely yours,



Robert H. Roswell, M.D.