

THE AMERICAN VETERAN

APRIL 2007 EDITION

SEGMENT TITLE: SEC. NICHOLSON INTERVIEW

JENNIFER BRADEN, HOST: NEWS OF POOR CONDITIONS AT WALTER REED ARMY MEDICAL CENTER IN WASHINGTON HAS RAISED CONCERNS ABOUT VETERANS' HEALTH CARE. WE SAT DOWN WITH SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS, JIM NICHOLSON, TO HEAR FROM VA'S LEADER WHAT THE NATION'S LARGEST HEALTH CARE SYSTEM IS DOING TO INSURE QUALITY CARE FOR AMERICA'S VETERANS. JIM BENSON SPOKE WITH THE SECRETARY AND ASKED HIM ABOUT HIS REACTION TO THE SITUATION AT WALTER REED.

R. JAMES NICHOLSON, SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: WELL, LIKE ALL AMERICANS, I WAS SADDENED TO HEAR WHAT WAS GOING ON AT WALTER REED WITH THESE YOUNG SERVICE MEMBERS WHO WERE IN MEDICAL HOLD IN THE FACILITIES THAT THEY WERE IN ACROSS THE STREET FROM WALTER REED. BUT, THE MEDICAL CARE ITSELF AT WALTER REED CONTINUES TO BE GOOD. BUT THEY REALLY NEED TO TIGHTEN UP THEIR ADMINISTRATIVE THINGS UP THERE AND THEY'RE DOING THAT.

JIM BENSON, INTERVIEWER: WHAT ACTIONS DID YOU TAKE IN VA IN RESPONSE TO WHAT YOU SAW THERE AND HEARD ABOUT AT WALTER REED?

NICHOLSON: I PUT OUT AN ORDER THAT ALL OF OUR FACILITIES AND FACILITY MANAGERS SHOULD DO AN INVENTORY AND TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT OUR FACILITIES TO MAKE SURE THAT WE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING THAT WASN'T UNACCEPTABLE GOING ON. I GAVE THEM A TIGHT DEADLINE FOR THAT AND WE GOT BACK A 300 AND SOME PAGE REPORT OF OUR 1400 FACILITIES AND MOST OF IT WAS NORMAL WEAR AND TEAR, DEFERRED ROUTINE KIND OF MAINTENANCE. ONE HOSPITAL NEEDS A NEW ROOF. ANOTHER NEEDS A NEW BOILER. AND SO WE'VE GOT THINGS TO DO, BUT YOU'D EXPECT THAT IN A PLANT OF OUR SIZE.

BENSON: WHAT OTHER INITIATIVES THAT HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO JUST ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF CARE ISSUES FOR VA?

NICHOLSON: WELL, WE TAKE GREAT PRIDE IN THE CARE WE PROVIDE VETERANS AT THE VA. TO ME THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS WHAT THE VETERANS SAY ABOUT US AND WE SURVEY THEM EVERY YEAR USING THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN AND THEY GIVE US 10, 11 POINTS ABOVE IN PRAISE, IN ACCEPTANCE OF THEIR COUNTERPARTS IN THE CIVILIAN HEALTH CARE SECTOR. BUT, WE HAVE TO KEEP WORKING AT IT. WE'RE A VERY LARGE SYSTEM; WE SEE OVER A MILLION PATIENTS A WEEK; AND WE'RE NOT YET PERFECT. WE WANT EACH OF THEM TO HAVE A GOOD EXPERIENCE BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT THEY DESERVE AT THE VA.

BENSON: WE HEAR A LOT TALK ABOUT THE FRUSTRATIONS AND THE BARRIERS THAT SOME OF THE MILITARY MEMBERS FACE WHEN THEY TRY TO TRANSITION FROM THE MILITARY TO VA IN TERMS OF THEIR CARE AND THEIR BENEFITS SYSTEM THAT WE OFFER. HOW DO YOU RESPOND TO THOSE KINDS OF CONCERNS AND WHAT ARE WE DOING TO MAYBE ALLEVIATE THOSE?

NICHOLSON: WELL, WE HAVE THESE TRANSITIONAL ISSUES WHERE PEOPLE ARE COMING OUT OF THE MILITARY TO THE VA AND IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT, IT'S IMPORTANT FOR EVERYBODY, BUT IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT FOR THOSE THAT ARE SERIOUSLY INJURED. I'VE MET WITH MANY FAMILIES AND SERVICE MEMBERS AND I STILL DO ROUTINELY AND I FIND OUT WHAT THEY HAVE GONE THROUGH AND THERE HAVE BEEN CASES WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN FRUSTRATED OR THEY HAVEN'T KNOWN QUITE HOW TO DEAL WITH THE BUREAUCRACY AND THE MASSIVE SYSTEM. SO WE HAVE EMBEDDED VA EMPLOYEES IN OVER 140 MILITARY FACILITIES TO GET ACQUAINTED WITH THESE PEOPLE BEFORE THEY COME OFF OF ACTIVE DUTY, TO BE AVAILABLE TO THEM. WE HAVE VA CASE WORKER/TRANSITIONAL COUNSELORS IN EVERY MILITARY HEALTH FACILITY. THERE ARE TEN MAJOR FACILITIES, AND OUR GOAL IS FOR THAT TRANSITION TO BE JUST AS SMOOTH AND HASSLE FREE AS POSSIBLE.

BENSON: AND I UNDERSTAND THERE'S ALSO 100 ADDITIONAL COUNSELORS THAT HAVE BEEN HIRED RECENTLY AS PART OF THAT INITIATIVE TO HELP WITH THAT TRANSITION?

NICHOLSON: LAST YEAR WE HIRED 100 ADDITIONAL OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM/OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM COUNSELORS TO GO INTO OUR VET CENTERS AND THEY HAVE BEEN VERY HELPFUL. AND ALMOST ALL OF THOSE ARE VETERANS. NOW, WE'RE GOING TO HIRE 100 NEW CASE ADVOCATES AND WE WANT THEM TO BE IN OUR MEDICAL FACILITIES WHERE WE HAVE PEOPLE COMING BACK FROM THE WAR WHO HAVE INJURIES, WHO ARE IN-PATIENTS. SO THAT THEY KNOW THERE IS SOMEONE, I CALL THEM A "GO TO" PERSON. THERE'S A "GO TO" PERSON THERE FOR THEM OR THEIR SPOUSE OR THEIR FAMILIES TO GO GET QUESTIONS ANSWERED, TO GET PROBLEMS SOLVED. I MET A MOTHER OF A YOUNG MAN WHO HAD A SPINAL CORD INJURY AND HE WAS DOING VERY WELL, BUT HE NEEDED A NEW PAD FOR HIS WHEELCHAIR, AND IT WAS ON ORDER FOR 3 MONTHS. THAT'S NOT ACCEPTABLE. AND IF WE HAD A CASE WORKER THAT WAS REALLY ON THE BALL, A "GO TO" PERSON, THEY'D GET THAT PAD A LOT SOONER AND THAT IS OUR GOAL.

BENSON: IN ADDITION TO LEADING ALL THE INITIATIVES VA HAS GOING, THE ONES WE HAVE BEEN DISCUSSING, THE PRESIDENT ALSO APPOINTED YOU TO HEAD THE INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE ON THE RETURNING GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR HEROES. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE TASK FORCE ACTIVITIES AND WHERE THEY'RE AT?

NICHOLSON: THE PRESIDENT DID ASK ME TO CHAIR THAT INTER-CABINET TASK FORCE. I HAVE THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, SECRETARY GATES, SECRETARY OF HHS, LABOR, HUD, THE HEAD OF THE SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION, THE OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IS ON THERE. WHAT WE'RE DOING IS SEEING HOW WE CAN INVENTORY ALL THE PROGRAMS THAT EXIST FOR VETERANS, AND THEN MAKE SURE THAT THEY'RE ALL OPERATING THE WAY THEY SHOULD AND THAT VETERANS FIND OUT ABOUT THEM. THEY KNOW OF THE VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS AVAILABLE TO THEM FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. WE'RE WORKING WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE TO SEE HOW WE CAN CONSOLIDATE, IF POSSIBLE, THE DISCHARGE PHYSICALS FOR VETERANS, OR FOR ACTIVE DUTY PEOPLE WHO ARE COMING OFF AND BECOMING VETERANS SO THAT WE CAN STREAMLINE AND SHORTEN THIS PROCESS.

BENSON: WE'RE GETTING BACK TO VA AT THE CENTER OF THIS. HOW HAVE THE EMPLOYEES IN THE VA REACTED TO NOT ONLY INITIATIVES BUT ALSO THE PUBLIC SCRUTINY THAT WE HAVE BEEN UNDER FOR RECENT TIME?

NICHOLSON: VA EMPLOYEES ARE GREAT, THEY'RE GREAT. I TRAVEL AROUND ALL THE TIME, MEET WITH THEM, THE PEOPLE IN THE HOSPITALS, REGIONAL OFFICES, WORKING IN THE CEMETERIES. I CONTINUE TO BE REALLY IMPRESSED WITH THE PEOPLE, THEY'RE THERE FOR A REASON, THEY'RE COMMITTED, DEDICATED. THEY LIKE OUR NOBLE MISSION OF SERVING VETERANS. AND THEIR DOPPLER IS UP AMAZINGLY WELL AND IT SHOULD BE BECAUSE THEY'VE GOT TO TAKE GREAT SATISFACTION IN THE GOOD JOB THAT THEY'RE DOING AND THE GOOD JOB THE VA IS DOING IN TAKING CARE OF VETERANS.

BENSON: WELL THAT BRINGS US BACK TO REALLY THE CENTER POINT OF ALL THIS AND THAT'S THE VETERANS THEMSELVES. WHAT CAN AN OIF/OEF RETURNING VETERANS EXPECT FROM VA?

NICHOLSON: WELL, THEY CAN EXPECT THE SERVICES THEY'VE EARNED. ANYBODY THAT'S BEEN OVER THERE IN THE COMBAT ZONE, IF THEY'RE A RESERVIST, GUARDSMAN, THEY'RE ELIGIBLE TO COME TO US FOR 24 MONTHS OF HEALTH SERVICE. IF THEY HAVE ANY SERVICE-CONNECTED PROBLEMS, WE'LL TAKE CARE OF THEM FOR THE REST OF THEIR LIVES. WHEN THEY COME TO US FILE A CLAIM AND THE OTHER THING WE'RE DOING IS THAT WE'RE PUTTING THE RETURNING OIF/OEF, THAT'S THE IRAQ/AFGHANISTAN WARRIORS, AT THE TOP OF THE STACK FOR THEIR CLAIMS. WE'RE GIVING THEM THE PRIORITY SO, IF THEY HAVE A PROBLEM WE CAN START GETTING THEM CLAIM PAYMENT AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

BENSON: IF YOU HAD ONE MESSAGE TO GIVE THE VETERANS RIGHT NOW, SIR, WHAT WOULD YOU WANT TO TELL THEM?

NICHOLSON: AT THE VA WE TAKE OUR MISSION VERY SERIOUSLY BECAUSE WARS HAVE BEGINNINGS AND ENDS, PRAY GOD, BUT THOSE WHO FIGHT THEM AND ARE INJURED AS A RESULT ARE ENTITLED TO THE CARE OF A

GRATEFUL NATION AND THAT CARE NEVER ENDS. AND I WANT THEM TO KNOW THAT WE ARE THERE FOR THEM. WE HAVE 235,000 PLUS DEDICATED PEOPLE AT THIS AGENCY WHOSE SOLE REASON FOR BEING HERE IS TO TAKE CARE OF THOSE VETERANS WHO HAVE EARNED OUR GRATITUDE, EARNED OUR RESPECT AND EARNED OUR CARE.

BENSON: THANK YOU, MR. SECRETARY.

BRADEN: VA STANDS READY, AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN SAID, "TO CARE FOR HIM WHO SHALL HAVE BORNE THE BATTLE AND FOR HIS WIDOW AND HIS ORPHAN."

END OF VIDEO