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Commission on Care's Conclusions for VA Health Care: Some Good Ideas, Yet Still a Prescription for "Death by a Thousand Cuts"

(Washington, DC)--The Commission on Care, borne of the 2014 Choice Act, has released its final, 300-plus page report. "While the commission offers some salient ideas, it is a prescription for 'death by a thousand cuts' of the VA healthcare system," said John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America. "We appreciate the commitment of the commissioners, the skillful guidance of Commission Chair Nancy Schlichting, and the professionalism of the commission staff," Rowan said. "We also are grateful that the commission did not see fit to endorse or call for the privatization of VA health care."

A singular difficulty is the commission's plan to achieve a "bold transformation" of VA health care through the creation of a board of directors. "A board of directors without the power of the purse is, in fact, a board of advisors," Rowan noted. "VVA and the other veterans service organizations function as a *de facto* board of advisors, both to Congress and the VA. Adding such a board would, in effect, add another layer of bureaucracy to an already bureaucracy-laden department."

"The recommendations of the commission are based on a wrong-headed premise, and therefore they are built on a faulty foundation. VA healthcare *already* is an integrated system, one that provides 'one-stop healthcare shopping' in a single facility," Rowan noted. "One out of every ten healthcare dollars is already being expended on healthcare outside the VA; care is provided by local MDs and other clinicians with certain specialties unavailable in a particular VA medical center or community-based outpatient clinic."

Ms. Schlichting and the commission rightfully "acknowledge that most of the significant issues facing VA healthcare delivery result from lack of access, in part because insufficient budgets have led to a shortage of clinicians. At the same time, the care provided by VA doctors, nurses, and support staff is often superior to that provided in the private sector. The VHA, under the leadership

of Dr. David Shulkin, is indeed integrating community care into the veterans' healthcare system.

“We applaud the commission’s recommendation to ‘provide a streamlined path to eligibility for healthcare for those with an other-than-honorable discharge who have substantial honorable service,’ ” said Rowan. We know of far too many Vietnam veterans who had served with honor in Vietnam yet fell afoul of senior enlisted men and officers on their return stateside and wound up with bad paper. We continue to hear of newly minted veterans discharged from service for a ‘personality disorder,’ when, in fact, they were suffering from a traumatic brain injury and/or PTSD.”

“VVA agrees with the need to support pay and benefits that are competitive with the private sector,” Rowan said. “It seems, though, that several of the recommendations, e.g., ensuring ‘adherence to national VHA standards [and] eliminating waste and redundancy, promoting innovation, and fostering the spread of best practices’ are both obvious and inherent in the VA healthcare system. However, without leadership that is accountable, what is optimal often plays second fiddle to the pressures of everyday care and a healthcare budget that is seriously lagging.

“If the VA healthcare system is to be truly veteran-centric, one of the stated goals of the commission, then primary care must remain in the province of the VA,” said Rowan. A veteran ought not ‘choose’ a primary care provider from the private sector, no matter the individual’s credentials and qualifications,” Rowan said. “This is one of the very cuts that threaten the integrity of a veteran-centric system.”

“So are some of the seemingly minor recommendations,” Rowan said, citing the potential that this transformation may include “‘pilots that expand eligibility to nonveterans to receive care at underused VHA providers and facilities and collect payment through private insurance.’ Should access to the VA system be granted to non-veterans, the demise of the federal department charged by law with providing care and treatment to those who served our nation will have begun.”

Vietnam Veterans of America is the nation’s only congressionally chartered veterans’ service organization dedicated to the needs of Vietnam-era veterans and their families. VVA’s founding principle is “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.”