

The American Legion



For God and country

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Legion Fights for Improved VA Access

WASHINGTON (June 2, 2003) – “It’s a long putt that came to within an inch of the cup.” That’s the reaction of American Legion National Commander Ronald F. Conley to the recommendations of the President’s Task Force to Improve Health Care Delivery for Our Nation’s Veterans.

The panel, on which American Legion National Adjutant Robert W. Spanogle served, recommends closer ties between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs on medicine and equipment purchasing; construction of additional cost-efficient joint facilities; tracking, treating and preventing illnesses related to hazardous battlefield exposures; and electronic sharing of information to make it easier to determine a veteran’s eligibility for disability compensation. The task force calls for one standard separation physical. The PTF also supports mandatory funding of the VA health care system for veterans in seven of the eight priority groups, leaving it up to Congress and the White House to develop a funding solution for Priority Group 8 veterans, whose incomes exceed means thresholds of both VA and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“The PTF came up with some sensible recommendations, the result of thoughtful deliberation,” said Conley, whose 2.8-million member Legion is the nation’s largest veterans organization. “But PTF didn’t go far enough. These recommendations alone will leave VA still lacking the resources to care for all the veterans who, by law, the system is required to serve.

“Social Security and Medicare receive mandatory funding to ensure that their budgets meet the needs of their recipients. We agree with PTF that VA health care should be funded on a mandatory basis, but we believe in mandatory funding for all veterans eligible to seek treatment in the system. To do otherwise is to tell Priority Group 8 veterans that their legal right to VA health care isn’t the nation’s priority at all. It’s a copout to pass the buck for Priority Group 8 veterans to the White House and Congress and to support full funding to treat the other veterans.”

An estimated 164,000 Priority Group 8 veterans eligible for medical treatment by the Department of Veterans Affairs were suspended from enrolling in the system Jan. 17 due to a lack of funding.

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Spanogle was one of three PTF commissioners who offered an alternative to leaving Priority Group 8 veterans out of the VA funding equation. Former VA Administrator Harry Walters and former House Veterans Affairs Committee Staff Director and General Counsel Mack Fleming co-authored the dissent. Under the Spanogle compromise, rejected by the PTF, Priority Group 8 veterans would be required to declare their public and private health insurance so that VA would bill them. Further, VA would be authorized to bill Medicare for the treatment it provides Medicare-eligible veterans; Indian Health Services is already a Medicare provider. Finally, the dissenting plan would authorize VA to offer a premium-based health insurance policy to an uninsured veteran, who would be expected to agree to make co-payments and to pay reasonable charges for the treatment of non-service-connected conditions.

“The American people know these Priority Group 8 veterans are not freeloaders, and the people will not quarrel with funding their access to VA health care,” Conley said. “In Priority Group 8, there are veterans from rural Iowa to Washington, D.C., and every type of community in between, suffering from lesser service-connected disabilities. I know a veteran in Priority Group 8 who did two combat tours in Vietnam, yet now he can’t enroll in the system. The troops who rescued Jessica Lynch may wind up in Priority Group 8. Robert Thomas of Arcadia, Fla., who retired from the Navy in 1971, was put in Priority Group 8. After he tried unsuccessfully to get treatment for his hearing loss at VA, he told The American Legion Magazine for its May edition: ‘I waited two years to get my first appointment and then found out the reason I came is no longer valid. I put in 20 years of separations, hardships and sacrifices in the military. I served in Korea and Vietnam. After waiting more than a year to be enrolled, the thanks I received was to be placed in the lowest priority group and told that VA does not have the money to treat my hearing problem.’

“To fight for the rights and benefits of America’s veterans, no matter their income or social status, is our moral mission. The funding reforms The American Legion is fighting for will help the very capable and dedicated VA health care staffs to carry out their statutory mission.”

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