

VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

Stearns County Service Center
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Dear Commanders,

There was a little bit of white ground this AM when I drove into work this morning and a lot of furnaces running as well. That also means that some folks might be having cold houses because they can't afford to turn up the heat. Recently we have had some folks come forward and ask for some assistance and that is good. The folks that I am worried about though is our older veterans and widows of veterans. There is NO reason why someone shouldn't be warm. There are energy assistance programs out there and other programs to help but folks won't ask for assistance. To my older veterans and widows you have worked very hard all your lives. Do go without because you want don't want to take away from the younger folks. There is enough to go around.

Does a furnace need to be replaced? Does the Fuel Oil or LP tank need to be filled and the check book doesn't allow it? The State Soldier and Assistance Program (SSAP) can help. Our younger veterans are applying for assistance but our older veterans won't come forward. The benefit is there for both the young veteran and old veteran. Yes even for that in between veteran and in this case that is you the VIETNAM Veteran.

Pride is a wonderful thing to have. It is your metal and foundation. But not staying warm in the winter will get you sick and cause more problems. If you are struggling with energy bills because the furnace needs to be replaced but you know you don't have the funds to make it happen. Please contact our office to see if the SSAP program can help. Depending on the cost the SSAP could go up to \$5,000.00 in replacing the furnace.

As we celebrate the Christmas Holidays please remember our young men and women who are fighting for our freedom. They are away from their regular family and need our thoughts and prayers.

From the entire staff of the Stearns County Veterans Service Office we would like to wish everyone a Very Merry Christmas and safe Holiday Season.

Sincerely,

Terry L. Ferdinandt
Stearns County Veterans Service Officer

Veterans Medical Care: American health care is remarkably diverse. In terms of how care is paid for and delivered, many of us effectively live in Canada, some live in Switzerland, some live in Britain, and some live in the unregulated market of conservative dreams. One result of this diversity is that we have plenty of home-grown evidence about what works and what doesn't. Naturally, then, politicians — Republicans in particular — are determined to scrap what works and promote what doesn't. And that brings this writer to Mitt Romney's latest really bad idea, unveiled on Veterans Day: to partially privatize the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). What Mr. Romney and everyone else should know is that the VHA is a huge policy success story, which offers important lessons for future health reform. Many people still have an image of veterans' health care based on the terrible state of the system two decades ago. Under the Clinton administration, however, the VHA was overhauled, and achieved a remarkable combination of rising quality and successful cost control. Multiple surveys have found the VHA providing better care than most Americans receive, even as the agency has held cost increases well below those facing Medicare and private insurers. Furthermore, the VHA has led the way in cost-saving innovation, especially the use of electronic medical records.

What's behind this success? Crucially, the VHA is an integrated system, which provides health care as well as paying for it. So it's free from the perverse incentives created when doctors and hospitals profit from expensive tests and procedures, whether or not those procedures actually make medical sense. And because VHA patients are in it for the long term, the agency has a stronger incentive to invest in prevention than private insurers, many of whose customers move on after a few years. And yes, this is —socialized medicine— although some private systems, like Kaiser Permanente, share many of the VHA's virtues. But it works — and suggests what it will take to solve the troubles of U.S. health care more broadly. Yet Mr. Romney believes that giving veterans vouchers to spend on private insurance would somehow yield better results. Why? Well, Republicans have a thing about vouchers. Earlier this year Representative Paul Ryan famously introduced a plan to convert Medicare into a voucher system; Mr. Romney's Medicare proposal follows similar lines. The claim, always, is the one Mr. Romney made last week, that —private sector competition would lower costs.

But we have a lot of evidence about how private-sector competition in health insurance works, and it's not favorable. The individual insurance market, which comes closest to the conservative ideal of free competition, has huge administrative costs and has no demonstrated ability to reduce other costs. Medicare Advantage, which allows Medicare beneficiaries to buy private insurance instead of having Medicare pay bills directly, has consistently had higher costs than the traditional program. And the international evidence accords with U.S. experience. The most efficient health care systems are integrated systems like the VHA; next best are single-payer systems like Medicare; the more privatized the system, the worse it performs. To be fair to Mr. Romney, he takes a somewhat softer line than others in his party, suggesting that the existing VHA system would remain available and that traditional Medicare would remain an option. In practice, however, partial privatization would almost surely undermine the public side of these programs. For example, one problem with the VHA is that its hospitals are spread too thinly across the nation; this problem would become worse if a substantial number of veterans were encouraged to opt out of the system.

So what lies behind the Republican obsession with privatization and voucherization? Ideology, of course. It's literally a fundamental article of faith in the G.O.P. that the private sector is always better than the government, and no amount of evidence can shake that credo. In fact, it's hard to avoid the sense that Republicans are especially eager to dismantle government programs that act as living demonstrations that their ideology is wrong. Bloated military budgets don't bother them much — Mr. Romney has pledged to reverse President Obama's defense cuts, despite the fact that no such cuts have actually taken place. But successful programs like veterans' health, Social Security and Medicare are in the crosshairs. Which brings this columnist to a final thought: maybe all this amounts to a case for Rick Perry. Any Republican would, if elected president, set out to undermine precisely those government programs that work best. But Mr. Perry might not remember which programs he was supposed to destroy.

Note: Readers who wish to comment on this article can do so at

<http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/11/14/opinion/krugman-vouchers-for-veterans-and-other-bad-ideas.html>. [Source: New York Times The Opinion Page Paul Krugman article 13 Nov 2011 ++]

VA Million Veteran Project Update 01:

VA is not just a place to receive health care and benefits like the GI Bill. It's also houses a unique research institution where medical advancements have continuously been made since 1925, like the first liver transplant and the development of the nicotine patch. Now, VA's research department is rolling with arguably its most ambitious project yet. The Million Veteran Program (MVP) was launched with a goal to build a database with a million blood samples and medical histories. The database hopes to lead to answers about how genes affect health and illness. In fact, screening, diagnosis, and treatment for some illnesses—such as some forms of cancer—have already been improved through knowledge about the effects of certain genes. A large research database may resolve issues that have baffled physicians for years; why treatments work for some and not for others, why some patients are at greater risk, and how to prevent certain illnesses before they spread.

MVP takes great strides to protect the privacy of every volunteer in the program. All personally identifiable data, like names and Social Security numbers, are stripped from the samples and medical history submissions. Simply put, no one can trace a Veteran back to their sample—there is no need to worry about impacts on care or benefits. MVP eclipsed 10,000 volunteers, but it needs a larger pool of data to really make strides.

Active involvement in this program includes:

- Filling out surveys about health and health-related behaviors;
- Providing a blood sample (containing DNA and other substances) that will be stored for future research;
- Completing an optional health assessment;
- Allowing secure access to VA and VA-linked medical and health information, including past and future health records; and
- Allowing future contact

VA Medical Centers that are currently open for enrollment of volunteers include: Albany, Albuquerque, Atlanta, Baltimore, Bay Pines, Birmingham, Boston, Buffalo, Charleston, Cleveland, Columbia, Durham, Gainesville, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Leavenworth, Little Rock, Long Beach, Miami, Manhattan, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Palo Alto, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, Portland, Salisbury, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, San Diego, Seattle, Shreveport, Tuscaloosa, Central Texas, Washington DC, and West Haven. This list will expand with time.

If you'd like to help your fellow Vets by being a part of the research solution, check out <http://www.research.va.gov/mvp/> or call (866) 441-6075 for more information on how to contribute your own sample. [Source: Vantage Point Alex Horton article 15 Nov 2011 ++]

Holiday Mail for Heroes Program:

The holiday season is just around the corner and it's time again to start thinking about being part of the 2011 American Red Cross Holiday Mail for Heroes. For a fifth year, American Red Cross and Pitney Bowes are partnering to ensure all Americans have an opportunity to send a touch of home this holiday season to members of our U.S. military, veterans and their families, many of whom will be far away from home this holiday season. Starting this fall and throughout the holiday season, the Red Cross is working with Pitney Bowes, a mail stream technology company, to collect and distribute holiday cards to American service members, veterans and their families in the United States and around the world. The process is very simple and takes no time at all - All you need is a pen and piece of paper to share your appreciation for the sacrifices members of the U.S. Armed Forces make to protect our freedoms. **DO NOT SEND THEM** to Walter Reed Hospital nor any Military medical facility. They do not want them, and postal service will return them. This decision was made by then Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Transportation Policy in 2001. This decision was made to ensure the safety and well being of patients and staff at medical centers throughout the Department of Defense.

The Holiday Mail for Heroes mail box is open and ready to receive for your cards. Please send all mail to: Holiday Mail For Heroes, P.O. Box 5456, Capitol Heights, MD 20791-5456. Sending a touch of home to American men and women who serve our country is the perfect way to express your appreciation and support during the holiday season. Every card received will be screened for hazardous materials by Pitney Bowes and then reviewed by Red Cross volunteers working around the country. Please observe the following guidelines to ensure a quick reviewing process:

- All cards being sent in for 2011 Holiday Mail For Heroes program should be postmarked no later than Friday, December 9, 2011.
- Ensure that all cards are signed.
- Use generic salutations such as —Dear Service Member. Cards addressed to specific individuals cannot be delivered through this program.
- Only cards are being accepted. Do not send letters.
- Do not include email or home addresses on the cards, as the program is not meant to foster pen pal relationships.
- Do not include inserts of any kind, including photos, as these items will be removed during the reviewing process.

Participants are encouraged to mail as many cards as they are comfortable sending. If you are mailing a large quantity, bundle the cards and place them in large mailing envelopes or use a flat rate box from the post office. Each card does not need its own envelope, as cards will be removed from all envelopes before distribution. Refrain from sending holiday cards with glitter. Many of these cards will be delivered to military and veterans medical facilities and the glitter could interfere with a patient's recovery.