

Vets Need 'Time Out' From CARES Cutbacks

by Patricia Salisbury

After surveying the wreckage of health care in his state, and around the country, Pennsylvania State Rep. Harold James (D-Philadelphia) on June 27 called for a national "time out" for all cutbacks in health-care services, and an expansion in hospitals, clinics, public health staff, and nursing homes (see *EIR*, July 8). James was addressing the tendency of public officials to fall into the trap of "adjusting" to the Bush Administration cuts in Medicaid and other health-care services, by agonizing about a nonexistent, least painful way of implementing cuts.

Around the country, although in a more limited way, veterans and others are aggressively calling the Bush Administration to account for its slashing of veterans' health care. Totally at odds with the manifest needs of veterans, the Administration is stubbornly pursuing a several years' study, CARES (Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services), to develop proposals for closing or cutting back services at 18 veterans hospitals around the country.

The CARES bureaucracy is preparing to take the next step toward these cuts, with a round of hearings scheduled for September. But at Congressional hearings in late June, it was revealed that the Veterans Affairs (VA) projections of veterans' needs resulted in a \$1.5 billion budget shortfall in the current fiscal year, and this provoked unprecedented denunciations by Congressmen from both parties of Administration incompetence—or worse. Although the initial reaction of the Administration and its unfortunate representative, VA Secretary Jim Nicholson, was to deny that there is a crisis, and propose a totally inadequate supplemental budget appropriation for Fiscal 2005, by July 13, the Administration was forced to bring its budget request closer into line with what veterans' organizations, Democrats, and some Republicans have been insisting was needed.

The CARES process, which relies on the very same projections that resulted in the \$1.5 billion shortfall, now has no leg to stand on—and no reason for continuing. A prominent member of the New York City CARES Local Advisory Panel, which is charged with representing the interests of the community, reported to *EIR* that his office was deluged with e-mails from veterans immediately after the Congressional hearings. His panel has no intention, he said, of being a rubber stamp for CARES. However, it remains to be seen whether local protests against CARES will grow into a unified movement to stop it, and to raise demands for rebuilding U.S.

health-care infrastructure, with the support of willing Congressional members in both parties.

Nicholson Changes His Tune

In Waco, Texas, on July 7, VA Secretary Nicholson appeared for a tour of the VA Hospital, which is now threatened with closure, at the behest of U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R) and U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards (D). Nicholson, who had been pilloried at Congressional hearings, was under enough pressure to declare that a "ramp-up" of VA health care might be required. Despite very short notice on the timing of the visit, Waco citizens came out to line the streets, organize motorcycle caravans, and demonstrate at the hospital site. They were joined by three LaRouche organizers, two of them members of the LaRouche Youth Movement, who distributed pamphlets from the LaRouche PAC, and later reported on their Waco organizing to the Internet radio "LaRouche Show" on July 9 (www.larouchepub.com).

Although the need for a ramp-up in veterans' health care may have been news to Nicholson, it was not news to veterans' leaders and service providers. The Waco hospital is the only one in the nation which has an inpatient facility for caring for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and one of only ten VA hospitals with a program for rehabilitation of the blind.

Bill Mahon, one of the key organizers of the Waco demonstration, told *EIR* on July 6: "During the CARES hearing on Oct. 3, 2003, I testified, and what I told the boneheads is the information they were using for the CARES Committee was prior to Sept. 11, 2001, so that in itself invalidated any projections they had for the next 20 years. We did not know what the clown in the Presidential office for the next 20 years would do, and Bush is a prime example."

Mahon also confirmed from his personal experience that older veterans are now being driven into the VA health system by the collapse of other health-care options. "I work as a veterans' service officer," he reported, "and every day, I talk to a new World War II veteran who seeks help from the VA who hasn't asked for help for 60 years because it was a pride thing, or it was just a generation thing, the 'greatest generation' not needing help. Well, they are now coming for help. . . ."

Waco is not the only place where the CARES process is being challenged. In Los Angeles, where the West Los Angeles VA facility is under attack, the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to take legal action against the Federal government, if necessary. Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky was quoted as saying, "What the Board has done is authorize the filing of a lawsuit, and we will be in the Federal government's face on this."

In Detroit, officials from the American Federation of Government Employees, Local 933, have protested the closing of a substance-abuse clinic at the John D. Dingell Veterans' Affairs Medical Center, a facility where those suffering from PTSD were being treated.