

"We have an obligation to the soldiers we send off to war to assure that they have the services they need and deserve upon their return."

Colchester, VT -- Rep. Peter Welch today visited with local health care providers for veterans to assess readiness for returning soldiers.

Today, Welch also announced that subcommittee Chairman John Tierney has responded to his request last week for a House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform investigation into recent reports of inadequate outpatient care at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C. (see letter below).

The committee hearing - held by the National Security and Foreign Affairs subcommittee on which Welch serves - is scheduled for March 5 at Walter Reed.

Welch scheduled the discussion at the Veterans Administration Colchester Outpatient Clinic to receive local feedback on the issue to take to Washington.

"I hope that the deplorable conditions at Building 18 at Walter Reed are not just the tip of the iceberg in terms of our lack of readiness for the return of hundreds of thousands of soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan," said Welch. "We have an obligation to the soldiers we send to war to assure that they have the services they need and deserve when they return."

Welch is a vocal opponent of President Bush's proposed cuts in the Veterans Administration out-year budgets and increases in health care fees and co-pays for veterans.

"President Bush did not prepare adequately for this war and it has become increasingly clear they are not prepared for the return of our troops and the impact it will have on veteran's services," said Welch. "In Vermont and around the county, we must make sure our soldiers and current veterans have what they need when they return from war."

After reading the reports in The Washington Post last week, Welch wrote to Waxman (see letter below), "I urge you to open an investigation of the disturbing conditions reported at Walter Reed and the overall readiness of the Veterans Administration and Department of Defense to provide essential services to the veterans who will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan."

In his visits to recovering soldiers at Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval Hospital inpatient care, Welch has been "humbled by their patriotism and impressed at the inpatient care they receive." He has also visited the Veterans Administration hospital in White River Junction.

February 26 Letter from Chairman John Tierney announcing March 5 Walter Reed hearing:

February 26, 2007

The Honorable Henry A. Waxman
Chairman
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Waxman:

I am writing to express my desire that the National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee conduct an oversight hearing into the treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. It is my intention to hold the hearing on Monday, March 5, 2007.

Recent press accounts in the Washington Post newspaper have described a multitude of disturbing concerns in the treatment of wounded soldiers at Walter Reed. The problems at Walter Reed are multitudinous and run the entire gamut of incompetence - from unsanitary and decrepit living quarters, overwhelmed and unqualified personnel, to a bureaucratic maze of incompatible recordkeeping systems.

These accounts of mistreatment indicate that the problems have been occurring for some time and are most likely systemic. Indeed, similar concerns have been shared with Members of Congress daily by veterans and constituent families as they attempt to navigate through the complex disability and veterans' health systems. Moreover, beginning under the leadership of previous Chairman Tom Davis, the Oversight and Government Reform Committee has continually investigated problems associated with veterans' health care.

Most disturbing to me is the seeming attitude of indifference towards these national heroes and their families by the command and administrators at Walter Reed. The health and safety of these approximately 700 soldiers should be the highest priority for the Department of Army, and I cannot think of a more important topic on which to hold the first National Security and Foreign Affairs Subcommittee hearing in the 110th Congress on. As the primary oversight committee within the House of Representatives, we owe it to these brave heroes to investigate the conditions and care at Walter Reed and to ensure prompt corrective action is taken.

As suggested to me by Rep. Peter Welch, a member of the Subcommittee, as well as by Ranking Member Chris Shays, my preference is that the Subcommittee hold the hearing on the grounds of the medical center. By doing so, Members of the Subcommittee will be able to visit and to speak with wounded soldiers who are currently rehabilitating and seeking continuing treatment on site, as well as to gain unfettered access to view the building and living conditions on the campus for themselves.

Sincerely,

John F. Tierney
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

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February 21 Letter from Rep. Peter Welch requesting a Walter Reed hearing:

February 21, 2007

The Honorable Henry Waxman
Chairman, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
2157 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0001

Dear Mr. Chairman,

Like many of our colleagues, I read of the appalling and unacceptable reports of outpatient care for our veterans at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in The Washington Post. The reports coincide with the President's budget proposal that would cut funding for veterans. This all occurs at a time when thousands of veterans will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and the need for services will only intensify.

I urge you to open an investigation of the disturbing conditions reported at Walter Reed and the overall readiness of the Veterans Administration and Department of Defense to provide essential services to the veterans who will be returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

All of us in Congress, regardless of our position on the war in Iraq, support our troops. In fact, many of us have had the opportunity to visit our recovering troops, humbled by their patriotism and impressed at the inpatient care they receive at Walter Reed and Bethesda Naval Hospital.

It is clear from these reports on outpatient care that the United States is not meeting its obligation to our injured veterans. Furthermore, this brings to focus that the President's budget is not committing the financial resources necessary to maintain the veterans services required.

We have an obligation to our troops. They reported for duty when called. It is now our country's obligation to provide them with the services they need.

I believe the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform can play a valuable role in providing the accountability necessary to make the required changes happen.

I look forward to working with you and the Committee on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Peter Welch
United States Congress