

VA chief vows to tackle rural health problems

By Matthew Brown - The Associated Press
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BILLINGS, Mont. — Facing a barrage of complaints about veterans' health care in rural America, the incoming secretary of Veteran Affairs pledged Wednesday to address "systemic" issues that hobble the quality and accessibility of care.

Secretary James Peake heard from a group of about 100 Montana veterans who described the Department of Veterans Affairs as a sometimes dysfunctional bureaucracy — and one particularly slow to address mental health issues.

Veterans told him they face months-long waits for appointments, arbitrary rejections of claims and 500-mile trips to receive care. Those who spoke spanned generations, including veterans of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War and peacetime service.

"We need more doctors. And it would be nice if we could keep them for a while," said Ernest LaFountain, who did three tours in Vietnam and now suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Peake, also a Vietnam combat veteran, took the helm of the scandal-battered VA in December. He said Wednesday he wanted to "reach out to rural America" and help those veterans not getting adequate care.

"The notion that the VA is uncaring, if we have pockets of that we're going to find it and root it out," he said.

Peake was appointed by President Bush in the wake of widespread reports of dismal care received by troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan — problems for which Bush later apologized. The secretary was in Montana at the invitation of Sen. Jon Tester, a Democratic member of the Veterans Affairs Committee.

The number of veterans under VA's care is expected to hit 5.8 million by 2009. Peake acknowledged giving that many people all the care they need is particularly difficult in rural areas such as Montana, where mental health and other services can sometimes be hundreds of miles from a veteran's home.

In an illustration of how much of a burden distance can be, Jim Kerr of Billings, commander of Disabled American Veterans Chapter 10, said volunteers in eastern Montana logged a combined 418,000 miles last year transporting more than 7,100 veterans to medical appointments.

In response to such problems, Peake announced the creation of a new health advisory committee to ensure VA is responsive to rural health concerns. He said more facilities are being built to serve to veterans, including a clinic that opened in Cut Bank last month and others planned in Havre and Lewistown.

"We need to make mental health care more local," he said. He said he also wanted to increase the number of mental health counselors, in particular those who are themselves veterans and "have walked the walk."

Tester said the changes Peake talked of need to happen quickly if VA hopes to better handle the incoming tide of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The significant issue coming out of Iraq is the PTSD issue, and I don't think we're ready for that right now," Tester said.

"The VA system is an incredibly good health care system for those who get through the door," he said. "The problem is with those who can't get through the door."