

Health Care

News and Notes

CARES Changes The Face Of Veterans Health Care

(NAPSA)—The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is in the midst of a comprehensive assessment of its aging hospital system and the changing veterans population that will ensure veterans access to quality VA health care well into the 21st century.

This landmark study of the nation's largest health care system is going on right now in VA regional health care networks across the country. It's called CARES, Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services. Through CARES, VA is evaluating the health services it provides, identifying the best ways to meet veterans' future needs, and realigning its medical facilities and services to meet them more effectively and efficiently.

The pilot CARES study conducted last year in the Chicago/Wisconsin region resulted in the announcement of a \$300 million investment in regional VA infrastructure to align it with future population projections and continue VA's focus on community-based outpatient care. Now, the rest of VA's 21 regional networks are gathering information and developing recommendations which will be considered by an independent commission established to assure that veterans' and the public's interests are addressed. This federally chartered panel of non-VA experts will visit VA locations, conduct public hearings and confer with veterans groups, government officials and health care experts before submitting recommendations to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for final approval.

The CARES process is based on



the collection and analysis of extensive information about VA facilities and demographic and actuarial projections for each VA market area. VA planners combine this with accessibility and cost effectiveness standards to identify initiatives addressing all VA health care programs. Regional networks then discuss their CARES initiatives with veterans and other interested groups before they are incorporated into the VA's national CARES plan and submitted to the commission for evaluation and approval. That final decision will be announced in late 2003.

"Health care is no longer about bricks and mortar," Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs Leo Mackay, Ph.D., said. "Twenty-first-century health care is about access to local care, early detection and prevention, efficient use of new technologies and home health care. CARES is about 21st-century health care."

VA officials stress that public participation in the CARES process is essential to its success and VA facility managers across the country are reaching out to their communities to involve them in planning the future of veterans' health care. Information about CARES, including contact information for each VA health care region, is available through the Internet at www.va.gov/CARES.