DAV calls for commission to strengthen, reform and preserve VA health care

The congressionally mandated Commission on Care was charged with examining veterans’ access to VA health care and to make recommendations on how best to organize the Veterans Health Administration, locate health resources and deliver health care to veterans during the next 20 years. However, at a commission meeting in March, it came to light that some members of the commission had been pursuing a plan to severely downsize or even eliminate the VA health care system altogether.

Seven of the 15 commissioners drafted and offered a so-called “strawman document” that centered around a plan to fully privatize veterans health care and completely close all VA health care treatment facilities within the next 20 years. Outraged by this document, DAV quickly built a coalition of veterans service organizations to condemn this outrageous proposal that would leave all veterans with no choice but to use private-sector health care providers—even those injured and ill veterans who rely on VA health care.

DAV Washington Headquarters Executive Director Garry Augustine and seven other veteran leaders jointly sent the commission a public letter strongly condemning the strawman proposal. Instead, they laid out for the commission, “a number of comprehensive reforms for the VA health care system, which were centered on veterans health care needs and preferences … which would restore and sustain a veterans health care system worthy of the men and women who served this nation with integrity and honor.”

“What was most unsettling was the utter lack of consideration
from these seven members that veterans would want to improve and expand the VA health care system,” said Augustine. “There was also no discussion of how this proposal would affect the coordination of care, the quality of medical services and the health outcomes for veterans.”

Subsequently, Augustine and other signers of the letter were invited to participate in a public roundtable discussion with the commission that took place April 18. At the meeting, Augustine and others reiterated their outright opposition to abolishing the VA, leading several of the commissioners who wrote the strawman proposal to publicly back away from their more radical proposals; however they continued to argue that veterans would be better off using private health care providers instead of the VA health care system. Augustine responded that the better solution would be to integrate the best community care providers into the VA system, while keeping the VA as the coordinator and primary provider of care for enrolled veterans.

“We fully recognize that VA can’t be everywhere for all veterans and that we must better utilize private-sector health care resources in the community. However, we are confident that any objective, unbiased analysis of all the relevant data and evidence about the VA health care system compared to private-sector health care will demonstrate the benefits of maintaining and strengthening a dedicated veterans health care system,” Augustine said. “We look forward to continued discussions on these vital matters and working with the commission to develop and implement real reform designed to fulfill the promise to America’s veterans, especially those who have been injured or made ill as a result of their service.”

The commission’s final report and recommendations are due at the end of June.