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Veterans still push for VA hospital
Officials say Allen Bennett conversion unlikely

Published: Tuesday, December 11, 2007 - 2:00 am

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The commander of the Disabled American Veterans' Greenville chapter said he was disappointed to learn that Allen Bennett Memorial Hospital in Greer was unlikely to become a veterans hospital.

But he's not giving up the charge.

"Right now, the process is for the service corps . . . (American Legion, DAV and Veterans of Foreign Wars) to go back, start talking to people and say 'let's start knocking on our senators' and congressmen's doors,' " said DAV Commander William Robinson. "Election is coming up. We need this. We want this hospital or we're looking for new politicians."

Robinson heard the news first-hand when Lawrence Biro, the Department of Veterans Affairs' Southeast network director, visited the hospital Dec. 7.

Advertisement Biro said the VA developed a 10-year plan several years ago that outlined the agency's expansion of services in each state.

The Upstate plan included opening an outpatient clinic in Spartanburg, currently underway; expanding access to specialty services such as prosthetics and ophthalmology, and contracting for 10 inpatient beds through an existing health-care provider, Biro said.

Although the plan does not include a hospital, Biro said the plan is sufficient to meet the Upstate's needs. It's unlikely the VA would deviate from the plan, he said.

"We're following this plan that was laid out because it's the fairest way of approaching the limited funds we have," he said.

Local veterans shared frustrations with Biro about what they described as an inadequate level of medical services in the Upstate. Robinson said his organization regularly transports veterans to the VA hospital in Columbia.

"There's more veterans than we've got room in the van to take down there," he said.

Biro said the agency has not accepted a vacant hospital building since the World War II era although the VA receives such offers frequently. He did express interest in partnering with another organization to create a program in the vacant, adjoining Roger Huntington Nursing Center that would serve homeless veterans.

"Over 30 percent of the homeless population are veterans," Biro said. "We don't have enough beds. We don't have enough programs."

U.S. Rep. Bob Inglis said while he wanted VA officials to be aware of what was available in Greer, any decision should be based on statistical need rather than politics.

"The plans should not be changed because of political influence and earmarking," Inglis said. "The plans should only be according to objective criteria."

Inglis was unable to attend the tour because he was in Illinois for the funeral of former congressman Henry Hyde.

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