

**Gulfport Local Advisory Panel (LAP) Public Hearing**  
**VA Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System**  
**Bldg. 17, Recreation Hall, 400 Veterans Avenue, Biloxi, MS**  
**May 12, 2005, 8:00 AM – 12:00 Noon and 1:00 PM – 5:00 PM**  
**Lunch: 12:00 Noon – 1:00 PM**

**Start Time: 8:00 am**

**Participants:**

- LAP members present: Barbara Watkins, LAP Chairperson; Richard Wallace, M.D.; Robert Travnicek, M.D.; A.J. Holloway; Gene Warr.
- LAP members absent: Johnnie Richard.
- PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) Consultants: Michele Deverich, Bryan Sage, Jones Lindgren (Perkins and Will).
- VISN Support Team: Cindy Jwainat.
- GCVAHCS Personnel: Richard Baltz, Christiane Jones, Chris Alexander, Bob Snyder.
- VA OSI /VSSC Representatives: Jimmie Tyus, VSSC.

The audience consisted of approximately 18 people, including speakers, attendees, and media representation. Information packets were available to all attendees at the entry to the meeting room on the table with the sign-in sheet.

The meeting was called to order by the Local Advisory Chairperson, Ms. Barbara Watkins, at 8:05 a.m. Mr. Dennis Moody, of the Disabled Veterans Department of Mississippi, led the group in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Ms. Watkins then reviewed the agenda for the attendees. She described the history of the CARES process in detail, and the Secretary's decision regarding Gulfport and Biloxi which included:

- The transfer of all current patient care services located at Gulfport to the Biloxi campus. The only services that will remain at Gulfport will be the boiler plant and laundry facilities.
- The pursuit of sharing opportunities with the Department of Defense (DOD)'s Keesler Air Force Base.
- Ensuring the CARES process effectively obtains stakeholder input.

Ms. Watkins described the role of the Contractor (PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and that of the Local Advisory Panel (LAP). She summarized the Statement of Work and the project objectives. She emphasized that the LAP members are appointed by the Secretary, are not compensated for their work, and have advisory authority only. Ultimate decisions in the CARES process will be made by the Secretary.

Ms. Watkins then asked the individual members of the LAP and the PwC team to introduce themselves.

Following the LAP member introductions, Ms. Watkins explained the purpose of the Public LAP meetings. She then referred to, and summarized, the LAP briefing document and the activity that took place at the prior week's May 2, 2005 LAP Administrative Meeting. She stated that all items discussed at the Administrative Meeting will be shared at the LAP Public meeting. These items included: ethics training for the LAP members; a summary of the LAP roles and responsibilities; an overview of the project scope; a presentation of the demand data to be used for the study; and a review of the study methodology and project timeframe.

Ms. Watkins then requested that the LAP members take several minutes to review the Standard Operating Procedures that had been drafted by the LAP on May 2, 2005 at the administrative meeting. She asked for any additional input from the Panel members, and if satisfied, to accept them into public record. Gene Warr moved for acceptance, and Dr. Richard Wallace seconded. With no objections, Ms. Watkins ruled that the Standard Operating Procedures had been adopted by unanimous consent.

Ms. Cindy Jwainat then introduced a video containing Allen Berkowitz, Assistant Director of the VA Office of Strategic Initiatives. The video served to review and explain the demand data to be used in the VA CARES study. Following the video, Ms. Jwainat presented the Demand Study for Gulfport/Biloxi describing the analysis of projected demand for VA services out to the year 2023.

The next presentation was given by Ms. Michele Deverich, of PwC. Her comments included a reiteration of the CARES decision specific to Gulfport and Biloxi. She then delivered the PwC presentation on study methodology and stakeholder input opportunities. This presentation included a review of:

- The study's objective of planning for healthcare equal to or better than is currently provided to the veterans in terms of:
  - Access
  - Quality, and
  - Cost Effectiveness
- The study outcomes, to include the development of a list of viable options to be narrowed down to six most feasible options in Stage I. In Stage II, PwC will study the six options further and identify the most viable option for recommendation to the Secretary for review and decision.
- The public input mechanisms in place to invite and collect public feedback and recommendations throughout the process.
- The study content, approach and timeline.

Ms. Deverich again made reference to the available handout material located on a table at the entry to the auditorium specific to the VA CARES mail stop address and CARES website information along with a box where attendees could leave written comments.

Relating to Ms. Deverich's presentation, there were several follow-up questions from the LAP.

- Dr. Wallace asked Ms. Deverich to discuss the criteria described in the statement of work presentation, for re-use of the VA Gulfport site. What criteria, other than fiscal returns, will be utilized to develop options?
  - Ms. Deverich responded that Team PwC will develop and study options relative to capital plans for the Biloxi site in response to the Secretary's CARES decision and the VA's re-use contractor, the Pruitt Group, will produce options relative to re-use of the Gulfport campus. Ms. Jwainat then added that the VA has a policy that new uses of property will provide the maximum benefit to the veteran population and will fit into the overall mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Mr. Holloway asked Ms. Deverich to define "co-location," as it was referred to in the presentation.
  - Ms. Deverich explained that "co-location" refers to the sharing of services with another governmental agency such as the Department of Defense and the Veterans Benefit Administration. Ms. Jwainat added that co-location may also include the use of VA property land by the National Cemetery. Ms. Watkins added that options for the Gulfport campus will be presented to the public at the second Public LAP meeting.
- Dr. Travnicsek requested that Ms. Deverich discuss the options to transition services from the Gulfport to Biloxi.
  - Ms. Deverich replied that there may be multiple options relative to: how services are transitioned from Gulfport to Biloxi; 1) the capital planning approach to replacing Gulfport services with facilities on the Biloxi campus; and the Gulfport campus re-use (e.g., could include lease or sale or a combination of both). Ms. Deverich indicated these options will be presented at the second Public LAP meeting. Ms. Watkins added that the only services that will remain functional and intact at Gulfport are laundry services and the boiler room. She emphasized that the issue is not "if" services will be transferred, but how and when these services at Gulfport be transferred to Biloxi.

Ms. Watkins again reviewed timeframes for submitting additional public input via the CARES website, and that the timeframe would include a period of 14 days following each public LAP meeting. She then opened the meeting to public comments:

- Testimony #1 – was from a veteran who referenced previous remarks made by Congressman Gene Taylor. He remarked that Congressman Taylor stated that the Gulfport Campus may be turned into a nursing school. The veteran stated that he feels there is a great need for long term nursing care for veterans in the area and that the Gulfport campus should offer both a nursing school and long term nursing care facilities.
- Testimony #2 expressed his wishes for assurance from the VA that the proper infrastructure will be in place to provide a smooth transition of services from Gulfport to Biloxi. He requested that there not be a loss, or lapse of services during the transition and that all services must be in place and operational before services at Gulfport are eliminated.

- Testimony #3 included a reiteration of the sentiments expressed in the previous testimonial.
  - Ms. Watkins replied that after the transition, services offered at Biloxi will be greater than or equal to the services currently in place.
- Testimony #4 was given by a thirty-five year veteran, a retired general in the Air Force and a former commander of a local air force base. He stated that the second largest teaching hospital in the VA system is run by the Department of Defense (DoD) at Keesler. He explained that there is a long history of DoD / VA collaboration at both the Gulfport and Biloxi campuses. He believes that there are opportunities for a co-location of services at Biloxi. He proposed that there be more sharing possibilities between Keesler and the VA that could include expanding certain specialty services and academic programs at Biloxi. He said he believes that the implementation of these opportunities will enable local veterans to receive high level specialty care closer to home without necessitating travel to locations such as New Orleans for specialty care.
- Testimony #5 included a presentation by a representative of the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in which he discussed the university's research into the potential of re-use at the Gulfport Campus since 2003, when Congressman Gene Taylor made this request of his institution. He proposed that the Gulfport campus be used for a research / teaching facility, affiliated with USM and functioning in conjunction with Keesler AFB. His suggestions included the addition of a nursing school to the Gulfport site. He stated that the VA requires more veteran services, disability studies, nurse training and a supply of clinical researchers. He said that his institution has developed a plan to achieve these measures. The PowerPoint presentation is to be provided to the LAP for public disclosure and review.

There being no additional public speakers, Ms. Watkins began the LAP deliberation phase. There was no discussion, and Ms. Watkins thanked those for attending and participating. Ms. Watkins agreed to adjourn the meeting at 11:20 am, but stated that personnel would be available and on site at Building 17 to take public comments until 5 p.m.

**The meeting was adjourned at 11:20 a.m.**