

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington –September 22, 2006

VETERANS: VA's Failures Exposed in Stunning GAO Report

Report finds that past VA budget planning was based on "unrealistic assumptions, errors in estimation, and insufficient data."

On Wednesday, I called on Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Jim Nicholson to provide Congress with an accurate plan for the health care of America's veterans after the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a startling report detailing the VA's failure to provide honest information for budget needs in fiscal years 2005 and 2006.

The GAO report found that the VA used faulty information when planning for overall health care demands and that it estimated health care costs for service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan based on prewar data. The report offers a stunning indictment of the Administration's commitment to our troops when they return home.

The GAO report was commissioned to investigate two emergency budget requests made by the President in 2005 for a total of nearly \$3 billion. Those Presidential requests came after I had made similar requests for additional funds based on reports of under-funded services for veterans. The GAO looked into why realistic funding levels were not initially requested by the VA and why additional funds were needed.

Specifically, the report found that:

- The VA failed to report the problems they were experiencing to Congress in a timely manner.
- The VA underestimated the cost of serving veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan because they used budget information that predates the war.
- The VA used faulty information on when they would see real dollars from proposed cost saving measures.
- The VA in many cases did not have any actual means of implementing proposed cost saving measures.

This independent report once again illustrates a VA that is incapable of preparing a real plan for the care of our nation's veterans. There was no plan when service members were sent off to Iraq and Afghanistan, there is no plan now, and most tragically, there is no plan in place for when they return home.

It's time for Secretary Nicholson to explain how the VA is going to put in place a system that will be able to handle the cost of providing mental health care, reducing patient wait times, and providing for an influx of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. I have not seen that plan, and this report certainly does not lead me to believe such a plan exists.

Taking care of our service members is the most basic responsibility of the Veterans Administration. Unfortunately, as the VA continues to play politics with their budget, America's men and women in uniform are getting shortchanged.

To view a time line of the VA's budget deception visit: <http://murray.senate.gov/veterans/VAmisled060920.pdf>

To view my comments on the report at a Veterans Affairs' Committee this week visit:

<http://murray.senate.gov/news.cfm?id=263503>

To view the GAO report visit:

<http://murray.senate.gov/veterans/GAO-06-958.pdf>

Moving Towards a Strong and Independent FDA

On Wednesday, I supported the nomination of Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach as FDA Commissioner in the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP). I believe that Dr. Von Eschenbach has the qualifications needed to serve as head of the FDA. As a former researcher, physician and cancer survivor Dr. von Eschenbach brings a unique background and perspective to this position.

While I remain deeply concerned about how the agency handled the over-the-counter application of Plan B and urge it to revisit the issue of age restrictions, I appreciate Dr. von Eschenbach's movement on a decision. The approval of Plan B marks real progress for millions of American women and a step toward rebuilding the credibility of the FDA.

I have always supported a strong and independent FDA. It is the only way in which the agency can truly operate effectively and with the confidence of American consumers and health care providers. As we work to improve drug safety and begin the process of reauthorizing critical legislation I hope that Dr. von Eschenbach will continue to provide the strong scientific leadership the FDA needs and deserves.

Calling for an End to Political Favoritism

On Thursday, I wrote to White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten to express my outrage at the practice of political favoritism within the Administration when it comes to government and agency grants and contracts. Specifically, I wrote because I was disturbed by a Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Inspector General's report that described partisan preference in the awarding of contracts under HUD Secretary Alphonso Jackson.

The Inspector General's report outlined how Secretary Jackson told his Assistant Secretaries and other senior staff to monitor the political affiliation of contract competitors and consider those affiliations when awarding contracts. It also described how Secretary Jackson did not want a certain contractor to receive additional HUD contracts because the contractor did not support the President.

The type of conduct described in the Inspector General's report is appalling at any level of government, but seeing it performed by a member of the President's cabinet who is responsible for administering and directing hundreds of millions of dollars of public money is inexcusable. In my letter, I urged Mr. Bolten to take the appropriate steps to address my concerns immediately.

OTHER NEWS - Conference Committee on GreenLane legislation - I am pleased to announce that this week I was named as one of the seven Democratic members of the conference committee on my GreenLane port security legislation. This position will allow me a voice in the final stages of making comprehensive port security a reality.

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