

**Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee****Veterans of Foreign Wars****AmVets****Military Order of the Purple Heart****Marine Corps League****Disabled American Vets****Korean War Veterans****Viet Nam Veterans of America****WAVES****4078****Jewish War Veterans****American Legion Auxillary****Veterans of Foreign Wars auxillary****Disabled American Veterans Auxillary****Viet Nam Vigil Committee**

**Testimony of Gary I. Laweryson, Chairman of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee on rural access to the Veterans Administration in the State of Maine**

**Honorable Senators and Congressman:**

**Thank you for allowing me to testify on behalf of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee. Our organization is comprised of the above veterans service organizations and represents a united voice working for the veterans of Maine.**

**The VA's CARES program, short for Capital Asset Realignment Enhanced Services, studied the access to Maine's rural veteran population and concluded more Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC's) were needed along Maine's North - South corridor and Western Maine. These CBOC's would provide a greater number of Maine's rural veterans the much needed access to quality outpatient and specialty care.**

**Every CBOC site within Maine has filled to capacity and are in need of expansion to be able to continue to provide the quality care Maine's veterans have come to expect.**

**The CARES study shows Maine is greater in area and rural veteran population than the other entire VISN 1 area. In 2004, the VA's computer projections were 154,000 veterans in Maine were eligible for care in the VA system. These projections did not take into account the veterans who move to Maine's rural areas to escape the fast life, nor Maine's growing retired veteran population.**

**Through the efforts of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee and its subsidiary organizations, Togus VAMROC enrolled 500 - 700 new veterans each month for over two years. Although this trend has slowed, Togus continues to enroll new veterans each month. Now that Maine's National Guard and Reserve components are returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, many with wounds and illnesses requiring VA care, the need for access will again increase.**

**Maine's current VA system is stretched to the breaking point and it is imperative new CBOC's are made available to provide timely access to services.**

**Due to Maine's unique geographical size it is difficult for many of Maine's veterans to travel to the existing sites. Maine has no mass transit system. Maine's veterans rely on the DAV shuttle bus for transport to Togus and the CBOC's. However, in the northern counties there is only one bus available. Many of Maine's rural veterans are on a limited, fixed income and are unable to afford transport to Togus or the nearest CBOC. Nor can these veterans afford health insurance or access to local care.**

**The Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee believes Togus should be expanded to become a**

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**full service VA Regional Medical Center, Independant of Boston. Maine's rural veterans must now travel several hours one way to obtain care at Togus or a CBOC. To require Maine's veterans to travel three to eight hours more to Boston for tertiary care is unacceptable. Maine has one of the top rated Cardiac Surgery Centers in the nation and is leading the nation in long term care and end of life care provided to our veterans. Sending Maine's veterans to Boston removes the family and local veteran support system sorely needed to effect recovery.**

**While the majority of the nation is urban or metro and have showed a slower growth, rural Maine has demonstrated a sustained growth pattern and will continue this trend.**

**Lastly, the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee would urge the VA to open lines of communations to all veterans, not just in Maine. In the past, the veterans have not felt the VA was user friendly. As a result, many older veterans and those serving on active duty have failed to avail themselves of the quality care provided by the current VA system.**

**In Maine, the veterans are banding together to educate our veterans on the many services available to them. " Operation I Served " is a joint project initiated to provide information to Maine's veterans, their spouses and families on services through the VA system, educational benefits, tax relief, financial assistance, employment assistance, housing assistance and long term care options through the VA and Maine's Veterans Homes system. Our program has received requests and been supplied to many other states.**

**Again, on behalf of the Maine Veterans Coordinating Committe and the Maine veterans we represent, thank you for allowing me this opportunity to speak to you. The Maine Veterans Coordinating Committee looks forward to continuing to work with Congress to enable the VA to provide quality services to all veterans.**

**Respectfully submitted,**

  
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