



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Congressman Dennis J. Kucinich
Prepared Testimony for CARES Commission Hearing
Cleveland, Ohio
August 12, 2003

The purpose of the Capital Asset Realignment for Enhanced Services (CARES) process is to assess proposed initiatives that address future health care needs of veterans and how the VA can best provide those services. This is about helping veterans get the best health care in the simplest manner. I believe we can accomplish this goal to help veterans in Northeast Ohio.

The proposal for the Eastern Market that is currently under consideration would close the Brecksville facility, renovate the Wade Park facility, and move the functions of the Brecksville facility to Wade Park. In my discussions with Director Bill Montague, he has agreed to add another important component to this proposal, which is to establish a primary health care clinic in Parma. The end result would not reduce hospital beds.

The reason to have a primary care health clinic in Parma is to increase access to basic health care services for veterans in that area. A significant proportion of the veterans in Northeast Ohio reside in Parma. For basic medical needs and appointments, it only makes sense to locate a health facility where it is most convenient.

I believe that the proposed addition to the Wade Park Hospital has the potential to be of great benefit to future patients. According to the proposal, current gaps in primary care, specialty care and inpatient medicine will be solved. The consolidated hospital will perform more efficient processing of veterans benefit claims that involve medical support. New rooms will be more comfortable for nursing home and mental health patients. I am working in Congress to make sure that appropriate funds are made available for veterans health care, both in terms of services and capital improvements.

In addition to the capital-intensive side of the consolidation proposal, there are other important issues related to the provision of health care, such as the status of employees. It is my hope that the employment situation for employees at Brecksville will be maintained or improved when the consolidation is complete. As the plans progress, we would expect to see a personnel plan that provides detail about the transfer of jobs. This plan should address anticipated job loss, if any, early retirement options, alternate job options and efforts to maintain pay scale if transfers to lower level positions occur.

I urge the CARES commission and others involved in the consolidation proposal to be responsive to employee requests for an improved workplace. Employees would like to have a structure of advancement in place, such as the federal employee system where employees can

move up from grade to grade in order to improve their positions and pay. Union representatives request sufficient office space for private meetings with individual union members to discuss workplace issues.

All of these issues have been relevant to the assumption that the consolidation will move forward. There are, however, current issues at Wade Park that should be addressed before consolidation, and if there are not, will only grow worse.

First, there must be sufficient medical staff on duty. Many areas of health care are experiencing shortages in nursing care staff, and this problem is not limited to the Veterans Administration's health facilities. Fewer employees are being asked to handle a growing workload. Nurses and other patient care employees have voiced concern that insufficient staffing is causing overworking and higher stress levels. These are just the first indicators of the dangers that understaffing can cause. Insufficient staffing levels lead to increased medical errors, diminished quality of care and even increased patient mortality levels. As we look toward increasing the size of the Wade Park Hospital, it may be time to re-establish appropriate staffing levels for employees involved in patient care.

Second, the available parking at Wade Park Hospital is insufficient. As the number of employees, patients and visitors grow, this shortage will become even worse. There must be plans for additional parking to accommodate more employees and patients.

I appreciate the opportunity to submit concerns at today's hearing and look forward to continued involvement in the CARES process as it moves forward.