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Veterans Journal



VA secretary leaving his post in the fall amid some criticism

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Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jim Nicholson announced last Tuesday that he has tendered his resignation to President Bush, effective no later than Oct. 1. Nicholson, a Vietnam veteran, was sworn in as VA secretary on Feb. 1, 2005.

In his letter of resignation Nicholson said, "It has been an honor and privilege to lead the VA during this historic time for our men and women who have worn the uniform. We have accomplished so much and the VA is always striving to improve our services to veterans."

Nicholson, who turns 70 in February, said he wants to return to the private sector. That will be a change from his position as director of a large government agency that sees more than 1 million patients a week in its health-care system.

The VA secretary left the private business world more than 10 years ago, where he ran a successful residential development and construction company. He was elected chairman of the Republican National Committee in January 1997, and prior to becoming VA secretary he served as the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

Paul Rieckhoff, an Iraq veteran and executive director of the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America group, welcomed Nicholson's resignation saying, "...with our veterans care system suffering from poor planning, inadequate preparation and a lack of quality leadership, this is a welcome change."

Rieckhoff is one of several outspoken critics from veterans groups who maintain that under Nicholson, the VA has been woefully unprepared for the influx of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, has consistently underestimated the number of new veterans who would seek care, and failed to spend the money Congress has allotted to address mental-health issues.

He said in a statement on July 18, following Nicholson's surprise announcement, that thousands of veterans are still waiting for their first VA appointment, and the backlog of veterans' benefits claims has increased by more than 50 percent over the past three years to more than 350,000.

Rieckhoff urged President Bush “to replace Nicholson with a well-qualified and effective candidate” and said he wants his group involved in the process.

VA increasing its mental-health presence

Addressing a special mental-health forum with the top clinicians and researchers from the Department of Veterans Affairs last week, VA secretary Nicholson announced plans to begin locating some of the department’s mental-health programs closer to places where primary care is provided.

“Given the reluctance of some veterans to talk about emotional problems, increasing our mental-health presence in primary care settings will give veterans a familiar venue in which to receive care — without actually going to an identified mental-health clinic,” he said.

Nicholson described VA as “a long-standing leader in mental health,” with \$3 billion devoted this year to mental-health services in a department that has the nation’s largest mental-health program.

Acknowledging that VA officials expect to see increasing numbers of newly returned combat veterans with posttraumatic stress disorder and other mental-health problems, Nicholson said mental-health care is currently provided at each of VA’s 153 medical centers and 882 outpatient clinics.

The secretary also announced plans to begin a series of regional conferences about providing mental-health care to veterans with “our partners at the state, local and community levels.”

Nickerson center receives homeless-program grant

The Department of Veterans Affairs has selected Providence’s Nickerson Community Center to receive \$189,494 this year to provide safe, comfortable housing in its 16-bed setting for homeless veterans.

VA Director Nicholson’s announcement of the Rhode Island program grant was part of a broader announcement that unveiled \$24 million in grants for homeless programs in 37 states, with 92 community-based groups to receive VA funding.

The grants are part of VA’s continuing efforts to reduce homelessness among veterans. VA has the largest integrated network of homeless-assistance programs in the country. In many cities and rural areas, VA social workers and other clinicians working with community partners conduct extensive outreach programs, clinical assessments, medical treatments, alcohol and drug-abuse counseling and employment assistance.

VA estimates that 200,000 veterans may be homeless on an average night, a 20 percent reduction during the past six years. More information about VA’s homeless programs is available on the Internet at www.va.gov/homeless

1967 tragedy of Forrestal will be remembered

On Saturday at 10:52 a.m., at the east knoll of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., the USS Forrestal Association will conduct the 40th memorial ceremony to honor 134 shipmates who perished on July 29, 1967, in the worst U. S. Navy disaster since World War II while the carrier Forrestal was conducting combat operations in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam.

After an errant rocket was accidentally fired, due to an electrical power surge from an F-4 Phantom jet readying for takeoff, it struck a wing fuel tank on an A-4 Skyhawk piloted by then Lt. Cmdr. and current Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain. McCain escaped from the flaming jet which had been ignited by the release of pressurized jet fuel from the wing tank, but one of his plane’s bombs exploded from

the heat of the fire, causing two additional nearby bomb-laden A-4 jets to explode.

Nine major explosions occurred, tearing large holes in the armored flight deck, allowing flaming jet fuel to drain into the interior of the ship, including the main hangar, causing massive fires in the stern section. The fire left 132 Forrestal crewmen dead, 62 injured, and 2 missing and presumed dead. The ship returned to Norfolk, Va., for extensive repairs.

Saturday's traditional Navy memorial ceremony — with an honor guard, a parade of colors, a bell ceremony, wreath-laying and echo taps — will be followed at 3 p.m., by another ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery to honor the 18 victims. For more information, call Kenneth Killmeyer, historian for the USS Forrestal Association, at (703) 435-2814, or send e-mail to Kenfidhist@aol.com

Coventry Veterans Council

The council will meet Wednesday at 10 a.m. for breakfast at AJ's restaurant, Main Street, West Warwick, to discuss plans for a flag retirement ceremony.

Persian Gulf War Information and Relief Commission

The commission will meet Wednesday at 10 a.m. in the south building conference room at the Rhode Island Veterans Home, 480 Metacom Ave., Bristol.

Italian American War

Veterans of the U.S.

The Department's monthly meeting will be held Thursday at the VA Medical Center, 830 Chalkstone Ave., Providence, at 7 p.m. in conference room 1.

VFW

Gatchell Post 306 and Auxiliary will host a fundraiser Italian dinner open to the public on Thursday from 4 to 7 p.m., at 171 Fountain St., Pawtucket; tickets are \$6 at the door. On Thursday, Auxiliary president Emily Berndt will hold her first council of administration meeting at Ewart Post 602, 55 Overland Ave., Pawtucket, at 7:30 p.m. The Department of Rhode Island Auxiliary will hold its annual picnic Sunday starting at 11 a.m. at Hugh Cole Pavilion in Warren; tickets are \$12.

43d Infantry

The Rhode Island Winged Victory Division will meet Saturday at 1:30 p.m., at the Arsenal, 176 Benefit St., Providence.

United Veterans Council

The council installed new officers this month: president, David E. Smith (Vietnam Veterans of America); vice president, Ginny Hanson (WAVES); secretary, Luisa White (WAVES); and, treasurer, Patricia Steinbrick (WAVES).

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