



VA Head Wants to Cut Delays in Vets' Pay

By HOPE YEN – 4 days ago

WASHINGTON (AP) — Departing Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson called for new measures Wednesday to reduce intractable delays in veterans disability pay, saying his successor will have to "think outside the box" to alleviate strains on the agency.

Nicholson, whose last work day is Friday, also cautioned that the next VA secretary will have to be careful in navigating improvements and pointed to lingering difficulties in coordinating care with the Pentagon. But he declined to say what kind of leader the VA needs to accomplish those goals.

"These decisions are really all the president's," Nicholson demurred in an interview with The Associated Press.

Speaking at times wistfully but optimistically on a range of topics, Nicholson acknowledged making mistakes during his embattled 2 1/2 year tenure, which saw significant budget shortfalls, an embarrassing data theft of veterans' personal information and the award of bonuses to high-ranking officials.

But he noted steps in improving mental health care, achievements in creating VA advisory committees to hear veterans' concerns directly, and insisted the VA was well-positioned to fulfill its mission.

Pointing to delays in disability benefits, Nicholson reiterated that 1,100 new processors won't be enough to reduce monthslong delays, particularly as the VA prepares to take on additional responsibilities from the Pentagon in awarding payments.

He urged Congress to pass legislation that would shorten the appeals time veterans have to challenge decisions, which he said contributed to the delays averaging 177 days. With current efforts, the VA has said it can only hope to reduce delays to 145-150 days.

Nicholson also urged creation of a pilot system that would let veterans get benefits almost immediately without having to prove their claim first, subject to random audits for validity that could come later. Such a proposal has been touted before by Harvard professor Linda Bilmes and some Democrats in Congress, although no action has been taken.

"The process ought to be very critically reviewed towards altering it and shortening it by legislation, because we have to follow the law the time windows to shorten the whole process," he said. "It means veterans will have to speed up a little bit in their responses, and other agencies, like DoD will have to speed up their responses."

"If we're going to truly expedite this and make it truly fast, it's got to be subject to review," Nicholson added.

His comments come as the Government Accountability Office released a report Wednesday which found that even after months of review, the Bush administration had yet to find clear answers to some of the worst problems afflicting wounded warriors, such as delays in disability payments and providing personalized care.

Investigators noted that several task forces and a presidential commission had urged an overhaul of the disability system by giving the VA a greater role. But no one had studied the impact the additional duties would have on an already-strained VA system.

"It is infuriating that so little has changed," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Officials pledged to take action after the deplorable conditions at Walter Reed were uncovered in February, but it has been more than seven months and veterans continue to wait for adequate care."

On Wednesday, Nicholson acknowledged that added burdens on the VA was a concern but said it was manageable if the VA hired even more claims processors than the 1,100 already hired.

"The answer is that the VA will be able to do it," Nicholson said. "I think the mood of the president and Congress is such, when we put this revised system into place, they will help provide" more money and staffing.

On other issues, Nicholson:

_Echoed President Bush's prediction that Democratic Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton will win the 2008 primary, but declined to predict who the Republican nominee might be.

"I don't have a preference," said Nicholson, a former Republican National Committee chairman, speaking of the GOP candidates. "I know most of them are people that will continue to have great concern and priority for veterans that this president has had."

_Declined to speculate who might succeed him. Among the names mentioned have been current VA deputy secretary Gordon Mansfield; Thomas Harvey, assistant secretary for congressional and legislative affairs; and former Arizona prosecutor Richard Romley, who served for three months as a special adviser on information security after last year's theft of 26.5 million veterans' data.

"I think the president will pick a good person to come here," said Nicholson, who has briefed Bush several times on a successor. "I think the next secretary, I hope, will want to continue the transformations that we put in place here: information technology, mental health initiatives, the polytrauma, the preventive health measures."

Nicholson, 69, repeated his ardent belief that the VA overall was in good shape, expressing regret for veterans who slipped through the cracks but arguing that recently cited problems involving lapse in mental health, suicide prevention and wait times were primarily anecdotal.

"When I travel around the country, and I welcome you and other reporters to go to our facilities and ask them, 'How's our care.' It's overwhelmingly, they're very effusive about how good their treatment is," he said.

"They're an inspiration. I would like them to know how much we care for them here at the VA," Nicholson said. "And we're here for them."