

LOCALNEWS

Bill renews effort to strengthen health care access for rural vets

Koochiching VSO voices her support

BY LAUREL BEAGER
Editor

A bill in the U.S. Senate intended to improve access to health care services for veterans living in rural communities has the support of Koochiching County's veterans service officer.

U.S. Sens. Al Franken, D-Minn., and John Boozman, R-Ark., continued their push to support the men and women who have served the nation by reintroducing a bipartisan bill. The Rural Veterans Health Care Improvement Act was originally introduced by Sens. Franken and Boozman in the 112th Congress and was reported out of the

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. However, it did not receive a vote in the full Senate.

The bill would give the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Office of Rural Health the tools it needs to help veterans in rural communities get the care they need quickly and without traveling long distances, said Franken in a statement.

Kathy Sikkila, Koochiching County veterans service officer, said she knows well the difficulty area veterans often have in obtaining health care. Veterans, many of them World War II and Vietnam era, are forced to drive 100-miles one way to the nearest clinic, she said.

Sikkila said even with the county's veterans transportation program, travel for area veterans can be difficult because of their age, their health issue and

the costs involved. Added to those issues are weather concerns in the winter, she said.

"This bill is trying to get funding so they don't have to go out of town," she said. Sikkila said she's attended a couple meetings about Franken's effort and voiced her support of the bill.

More than 40 percent of all veterans enrolled in the VA system live in rural areas, yet these areas have a shortage of medical providers and facilities. Often, rural veterans live hundreds of miles from the nearest VA Medical Center. The VA has created smaller community-based outpatient clinics, but they are still often too far away or too small to fully meet veterans' needs. And a growing number of female veterans with distinctive health care needs face par-

ticular barriers in rural settings.

Sikkila said moving back to a fee basis would be an improvement, as it would allow the VA to authorize a veteran to seek care at a nearby clinic and then bill the VA for the service.

"We are pushing for it," said Sikkila of the bill. "It would be a great thing for International Falls if we can get it."

"Far too often, veterans living in Minnesota's rural communities run into roadblocks when it comes to getting quality health care," Franken said. "My bill will ensure that VA, through its Office of Rural Health, can plan for and manage the resources it has for rural areas so we can ensure our veterans get access to the care they've earned."

"Our veterans deserve quality access to health

care no matter where they live," Boozman said in the statement. "Congress is investing in outreach to rural areas through community based clinics but we still have room to improve the care our rural veterans have earned. This needs to be a priority and this legislation is a step in the right direction to improving access for our veterans in Arkansas and across the country."

The legislation requires the VA to develop a five-year strategic plan for the ORH within six months of enactment. The plan must include goals and objectives for:

- Recruiting and retaining Veterans Health Administration (VHA) health-care personnel in rural areas.
- Ensuring timeliness and quality of care by VHA

in rural areas through contract and fee-basis providers.

- The implementation, expansion, and enhanced use of telemedicine in rural areas.
- The full and effective use of VA's mobile outpatient clinics.
- The modification of ORH funding allocation mechanisms so that the funds actually go to initiatives and projects that improve access to and quality of care for rural veterans.

In addition, the strategic plan must include procedures for soliciting from VA rural providers a statement of their clinical capacity, how they handle emergencies that exceed that capacity, including mental health emergencies, and how they provide and coordinate health care for women veterans.

Former Falls city administrator recognized for leadership

CGMC STAFF REPORT

Former International Falls City Administrator Rod Otterness was recognized for his rural leadership to Minnesota by the Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities July 25 during the coalition's three-day summer conference in Bemidji.

The Bob Filson Award for Distinguished Rural Leadership is given upon retirement to CGMC city managers/administrators who have displayed sound judgment in rural policy matters throughout their careers and made significant contributions to

the CGMC.

Though he did not retire from public service, Otterness recently left Minnesota to take a position as city administrator of Union Gap, Wash. He had served as International Falls city administrator since 2004. In that role, he was very active in the CGMC through his participation in numerous events and conferences. He also served on the Board of the League of



Rod Otterness

Minnesota Cities, where he looked out for the interests of Greater Minnesota.

"Rod was a fixture at CGMC lobby days and conferences, despite the long distance he had to travel from International Falls," said Bruce Ahlgren, president of the CGMC and mayor of Cloquet. "His advocacy will be greatly missed."

CGMC is a nonprofit, non-partisan advocacy organization representing 85 cities outside of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. The coalition educates legislators about issues important to Greater Minnesota.

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An eighty-year-old mystery on Rainy Lake unfolds enticing friends into a hunt that pulls a dangerous game into the present.

Author Diane Bradley grew up in the northern woods by Two Harbors, Minnesota. Her favorite place is Rainy Lake where she loves to fish and kayak.

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