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The VA In The Modern Era

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The VA In The Modern Era

By Jo Ann Emerson

The Veterans Administration has a mission unlike that of any other federal agency. Put simply, they are charged with keeping the promise America makes to the men and women who serve in uniform. They and their families enter into an agreement with our country: you take care of us, and we will take care of you.

That simple agreement is not always easy to keep for a federal agency notorious for unacceptable backlogs, difficult health care policies, and even lapses in the safe practice of medicine. Yet despite these problems, the VA has many dedicated professionals (benefits counselors, medical technicians, nurses, doctors, claims agents and case managers) who work very hard to serve the brave Americans who have served our country.

And in Congress, where it seems you can find two people who will argue until they are blue in the face about anything at all, no one disputes the importance of the VA and the care and benefits it provides. Finding funding for the VA, even in a difficult budget environment like this one, is something that Republicans and Democrats can agree is important.

I talk to a lot of veterans in Southern Missouri about their VA concerns. Some have casework that needs to be addressed: their benefits have been delayed in processing for too long, they have a service-connected condition that needs the attention of a specialist, or they just need help with the paperwork. All the cases have one thing in common,

however: a desire for the VA to work faster, to be more efficient, and to provide better information to our veterans and their families.

When a claim is delayed or when a doctor is too far away, it is the veteran who pays the price. He or she must wait, must sift through papers, must sit on hold while someone works to resolve their problem. Even then, the answer is not always satisfactory. I do not doubt the good intentions of the staff and providers at the VA, I just think they have to find new and better ways to cut through the red tape. Money alone won't solve these problems at the VA.

As I have said many times before, the VA needs a change in culture to dramatically reduce its backlogs and to give veterans the quality care they deserve. And the challenges will continue to mount. Battlefield injuries are changing as war and weaponry changes. Soldiers who would have died on the field of battle 60 years ago are today making it to a field hospital. Their lives are saved by their fellow soldiers with modern medicine. Still, when they return home, they need a significant amount of care, rehabilitation, follow-up and monitoring to help them get on with their lives.

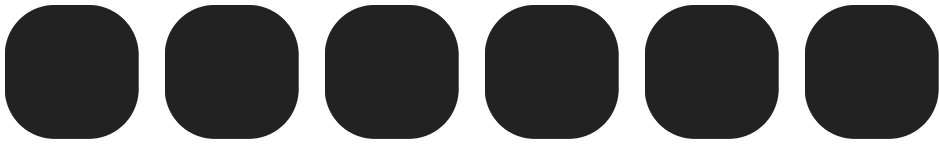
For young veterans, it is especially important that the VA works to stay in touch with them, to deliver information frequently and clearly. One indication that the culture at the VA is changing in this one aspect is this month's issuance of a social media policy. The VA has more than 100 pages on Facebook, more than 50 Twitter feeds, two blogs, a YouTube channel and a Flickr page, according to a recent article in Information Week. It is good to see the VA embracing the modern era in this respect and trying harder to stay in contact with the veterans who need their services today more than ever.

Jo Ann Emerson of Cape Girardeau represents the Eighth District of Missouri in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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