

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 11, 2001

Mr. Philip P. Thomas
Chief Executive Officer
Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System
11301 Wilshire Boulevard
Mail Code 00CL/135
Los Angeles, California 90073

Dear Mr. Thomas,

I am writing to express the concerns of veterans currently residing at the Domiciliary. As you know, my district office caseworkers visited the Domiciliary on March 8, 2001, in order to gain a more complete understanding of its function. The visit was also intended to provide Domiciliary veterans an opportunity to raise their concerns and questions about the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLA). The veterans' questions are regarding land use, hospital, health care, the Domiciliary, and other aspects of GLA.

Land Use

1. The Softball Diamond

It is my understanding that the veterans at the Domiciliary would like to use the softball diamond located in the Jackie Robinson Stadium. Several veterans indicated that numerous times, they have tried to schedule a specific time to use the diamond. However, they report that they are consistently told that the times they have available conflict with other user's existing schedule for use of the diamond. I would like to know how the veterans at the Domiciliary can schedule a time to use the softball diamond, especially considering their daily schedules as Domiciliary residents.

2. The Brentwood Swimming Pool

According to the veterans at the Domiciliary, the pool has been closed for two years. Many veterans feel that the pool would be useful for recreation, therapy, and exercise. Please let me know why the pool is currently closed, and whether there are any plans to reopen it in the near future. I am particularly interested in learning whether the veterans residing at the Domiciliary could use the pool at the VA complex at Sepulveda, and if so, whether a shuttle could be made available to transport interested veterans there for this purpose.

3. Alternative Revenue Agreements

A concern that was frequently voiced by the veterans at the Domiciliary is that the income generated by alternative revenue agreements at GLA is not being used appropriately. Specifically, they felt that revenue earned by GLA was being spent on programs and initiatives that do not directly benefit veterans. Due to this concern, veterans would like an accounting of income from alternative sources, and how it is spent.

4. Departmental Budgets

The veterans are also concerned about how each department at GLA uses its funding. In particular, many veterans mentioned they feel that various departments and programs on the GLA campus choose not to spend their entire budget, so they can return the balance of their funds and receive a bonus in return. The veterans informed my staff that they are especially concerned about this occurring in programs that have food service components. I would like to know what happens to the funds not spent by GLA programs and departments at the end of a fiscal year.

5. GLA Property

The veterans at the Domiciliary would also like to know whether the Wadsworth Chapel and the flagpoles are being refurbished with private funds or at the VA's expense.

Many veterans at the Domiciliary feel that their skills are not being adequately utilized. Specifically, the veterans at the Domiciliary told my staff that many of them possess the skills necessary to paint and make other improvements at the Domiciliary. Additionally, several veterans at the Domiciliary have indicated that they can perform repairs at a lower cost to the VA than private companies would charge. I would like to know whether VA regulations require or permit GLA to give preference to veterans if they submit bids or request for proposals (RFP) for construction and repair projects. I understand that at the New Directions Regional Opportunity Center, residents perform many repairs and light construction projects on their building. I would appreciate it if you would also let me know whether a comparable program might be feasible at the Domiciliary, especially if there are no regulations that give preference to bids and RFPs submitted by veterans.

It is my understanding that occasionally, movies are filmed on the GLA campus. Many veterans feel that they should be able to work as extras in these movies. Several veterans have reported to my staff that the actors and film crews have been rude to them. According to one veteran, during a recent filming several veterans were hired to work on the film. Apparently, they were paid a lower wage than they had been originally promised. I would like to know whether the filming arrangements contain stipulations that address how the movie crews should treat the veterans, and how these arrangements are negotiated on behalf of the veterans to ensure that their rights are protected.

Hospital and Health Care Issues:

1. Dental Care

A veteran currently residing at the Domiciliary also reported to my staff that veterans do not receive dental care unless their dental problems are service-connected, or they have been living at the facility for a certain amount of time. I would like to know the VA's policy on dental care for veterans, and the specific type of dental care provided at GLA.

2. Hospital Staff

Many veterans also voiced their concerns about the treatment they receive from the hospital staff. They feel that they have to wait longer to receive treatment simply because they are residents of the Domiciliary. Please let me know GLA's policy on treating veterans who are temporarily residing on the campus and in programs such as the Domiciliary.

Additionally, some veterans feel that the hospital staff is not trained appropriately to deal with veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other problems that may affect their behavior. I would like to know how the hospital staff is trained to deal with veterans who have psychological problems.

Several veterans told my district office staff that there was no hepatologist at the hospital. I understand that there is a Hepatitis C coordinator at GLA, and I would like to know how he or she assists veterans with this disease. I am particularly interested in learning if the current GLA Hepatitis C treatment program includes a provision for a

hepatologist, and if not, whether there are future plans to hire one. This matter is especially significant, since as you know, many veterans suffer from Hepatitis C and alcoholism.

Finally, many veterans were concerned about the rate of turnover of doctors at the medical clinics. Please let me know what is being done to address the turnover rate of physicians at these clinics.

3. Medical Records

Another issue that was raised during my staff's visit was the difficulties veterans encounter when trying to obtain copies of their medical records. As you may already be aware, many veterans contact my district office for assistance in obtaining their records.

I would like to know what you can do to improve responsiveness to requests made by veterans and the VA Regional Office for medical records. As you know, veterans need their medical records to support their claims for Social Security and VA benefits.

4. The Mental Health Clinic

Many veterans felt that the Mental Health Clinic is understaffed, and as a result, they do not receive adequate treatment. I would like to know what the current staffing levels at the clinic are, and whether there are plans to increase the amount of staff employed there.

The Domiciliary

1. Medical Treatment

Many veterans at the Domiciliary feel that they do not have any recourse to appeal their physician's or psychologist's diagnoses and prescriptions. Please let me know what recourse veterans have to contest their doctor's diagnoses and guidelines for treatment.

According to several veterans at the Domiciliary, there is no otorhinolaryngologist (ENT) in residence at their facility. I would like to know whether there are plans to place an ENT at the Domiciliary.

2. Wheelchair Ramps

Veterans also complained about the lack of safety strips on the wheelchair ramps at the Domiciliary. It is my understanding that these strips increase the amount of friction between the chair and the cement. The veterans who spoke with my staff about this issue indicated that they had been promised several times that the strips would be installed. I would like to know when the safety strips will be installed.

3. Resources for Job Searching

Another concern of the veterans at the Domiciliary is that they feel they do not have enough computer programs and job resources to perform a complete and thorough job search. One veteran in particular asked why there is no program on the GLA campus similar to the "Job Club" program at the Long Beach VA Medical Center. It is my understanding that this program restricts computer access to Job Club members conducting a bona fide job search. This provision would seem to ensure that veterans make the most of their computer time, and I would appreciate it if you would let me know whether a similar program or policy could be enacted at the Domiciliary.

Additionally, the veterans at the Domiciliary asked whether copies of employer listings, such as the California Business Directory and the Registry of California Manufacturers, can be made available for their use.

The veterans at the Domiciliary also told my staff they would like a typing tutor program installed on the computers.

My district office staff also spoke with veterans at the Domiciliary who indicated that they are not allowed to fax documents without a staff member being present. I would like to know the Domiciliary's policy on residents receiving and sending faxes.

4. Compensated Work Training (CWT)

Please let me know how this program is structured, including the limits on how long veterans can work in a certain job, and how their wages are determined. Several veterans at the Domiciliary have indicated that the length of the program was originally 90 days, but it has now been shortened to 60 days. Additionally, they have stated that the participants' wages were determined by paying them \$1 more than minimum wage,

Page 6
April 11, 2001

but, the pay has not yet been increased to reflect the current minimum wage. I would appreciate it if you would review and address this concern as well.

4. Legal Clinic

I understand that the program which allowed UCLA law students the opportunity to assist veterans with legal questions is no longer in service. I would like to know why this program has been discontinued.

5. Haircuts

My staff also learned that the veterans at the Domiciliary would like haircuts more frequently than every three weeks, since many of them feel that haircuts improve their self-esteem. Please let me know how the frequency of haircuts is determined.

It is my understanding that Pamela Wang's contract for hair cutting at the Domiciliary ended on March 31, 2001, and a petition was presented by the veterans to the staff at the Domiciliary in support of the renewal of her contract. I would appreciate it if you would let me know whether Ms. Wang's contract was renewed, and the role of the veterans' petition in making the decision. If her contract was not renewed, please let me know why this decision was made.

6. Alcohol Treatment Programs

Several veterans would like to know why the Domiciliary only uses the Alcoholics Anonymous' Twelve Step program to rehabilitate alcoholic veterans and does not utilize alternative methods of treatment.

7. Mail

Many veterans at the Domiciliary complained that they do not receive mail in a timely manner, or do not receive it at all. In fact, several veterans did not receive correspondence sent by my district office. Please review this situation and let me know what can be done to address this problem.

Other Concerns:

1. Housing

Page 7
April 11, 2001

Several veterans have indicated to my district office staff that they would like more information about the VASH program. Please let me know how the program is structured, including eligibility requirements and application procedures.

3. The Haven

I understand that recently, a veteran residing at the Haven died. The veterans who spoke to my staff about this issue believe that his death was caused by his drinking an entire bottle of Lysterine. As I am sure you can imagine, many veterans residing on the GLA campus are quite concerned about the circumstances of his death. I would like to know whether his death has been investigated, and if any measures are being considered to prevent similar deaths in the future.

Several veterans also reported to my staff that they believe, prescription drugs are not being handled appropriately at the Haven. Specifically, they feel that it is improper for former drug addicts to monitor the cabinet where veterans' medication is kept. I would appreciate it if you would let me know the Haven's policy on storing and distributing prescription drugs.

4. Police

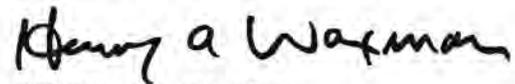
A frequent concern raised by veterans at the Domiciliary was that they feel they have been harassed and inappropriately treated by the police at GLA. I would like to know how the VA police are trained to deal with homeless veterans and veterans with psychological problems.

I would appreciate it if you would look into all of these concerns raised by the residents of the Domiciliary. Many of the veterans who spoke with my staff expressed a frustration that their problems and concerns are not being addressed. Please let me know how veterans at GLA can effectively communicate their concerns and issues in the future so they can be addressed in a timely and substantive manner. To further the goal of better communication between your office and Domiciliary residents, I plan to make both this letter and your response available to veterans residing there, so they can learn how their concerns have been directly addressed.

I very much appreciate your time and attention to these issues, and look forward to your response. Please contact Lisa Pinto or Karen Swift in my district office at (323)651-1040 if you need additional information.

Page 8
April 11, 2001

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Waxman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent "H" and "W".

HENRY A. WAXMAN
Member of Congress

HAW:km

cc: Kenneth Clark, Network Director, VISN 22