



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Jack M. Martins

From the Desk of Senator Jack M. Martins

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Follow Through

I don't know about you but my stomach is turning and it's not from too many barbecues this past Memorial Day weekend. No, my stomach is turning because we, as a nation, are hypocritical in the treatment of our veterans.

That's not easy to write and I'm sure it makes some of you uncomfortable, but someone owes it to these men and women to speak what's truly on their minds. I spent the Memorial Day weekend at numerous observances and I had the honor of spending time with many veterans and their families. In no uncertain terms, our veterans are unanimously disgusted by the recent Veterans Administration (VA) healthcare revelations that treatment delays and falsified records have led to the deaths of fellow veterans.

So while we shoot off fireworks, thank our veterans for their service, and universally commit to remember their sacrifice, we must somehow reconcile with the reality that other veterans are being systematically denied quality healthcare. The veterans I spoke with had one overarching sentiment: we could keep our parades, bands, pomp and circumstance if only we would treat their brother and sister veterans with the respect they deserve.

They're even more put off by all the debates, hair splitting, and finger-pointing on Capitol Hill. The truth is these very VA scandals are as old as the hills and prior presidential administrations had the exact same, unanswered problems. That's the frustrating shame we shoulder together as a nation. The health and well-being of the very people who served us, many of whom were maimed, has become a football used for political advantage. Unfortunately, in Washington, while that football gets punted around, no one ever gets it down field.

Here in New York, we've taken steps to get help for our veterans. We created a peer to peer veterans counseling program to help those struggling with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury. We also set aside a percentage of state contracts for returning service disabled veterans and are working on a tax return checkoff to fund assistance for homeless veterans. But to build on these, we need a comprehensive federal policy to ensure that our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines are not forgotten and neglected by their own government. That's even more crucial here on Long Island, which has one of the largest veteran populations in the country.

I don't purport to have the answers for this federal failure but I do know that they have just approved allowing more veterans to obtain treatment at private hospitals in order to improve care. But that will still only be a small fraction of their healthcare needs which prompted a very good observation from these veterans: while our nation fitfully embarks on the colossal undertaking of a National Healthcare plan, how do we rationalize that we haven't yet extended similar private healthcare to those who have sacrificed for us? How do we justify that those that deserve our best instead sometimes receive slow and substandard care at overcrowded and underfunded VA hospitals and clinics? The truth is there is no good reason. Some will argue that the VA Healthcare system was designed to give veterans and their particular needs better, more personalized attention. But clearly, that's just not the

case. They wait weeks on end for appointments, see a different physician each time, and have no access to the world-class specialists our nation has to offer. It was a well-intentioned plan that just didn't work but like all things federal, it is now a sacred cow that can't be touched. That is unless everyday Americans create enough of an uproar to force change.

That call to action should start right here on Long Island, home to one of the largest veteran populations in our country, nearly 140,000 of them. We are reminded that when they were called, there was no debate or hair-splitting. They went and they went honorably. They have every right to expect the same from us.

When the holiday hullabaloo ended on Tuesday morning, Americans across the country, myself included, woke up and looked in the bathroom mirror. We had to face ourselves for not doing more.

Good intentions alone won't get it done.