



Washburn County VSO Lisa Powers

Minneapolis VA Hosts Town Hall In Rice Lake; Veterans Air Frustrations, Praise VA Staff

The meeting room in the back of the Rice Lake (WI) Veterans Center was packed on September 30 for the fifth VA Town Hall hosted by Minneapolis VA Health Care System in the past year.

About 35 Veterans and several spouses attended. Four county veterans service officers – Renee Brown of Sawyer County, Mike Haley of Chippewa Valley, Lisa Powers of Washburn County and Philip Landroff of Barron County – and Jesse Garza, aide to Rep. Sean Duffy, were also present.

The 90-minute meeting began with Rice Lake American Legion Commander Bill Coleman leading the group in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Attending from the Minneapolis VA were Chief of Staff Kent Crossley, MD, Associate Director Kurt Thielen, Chief Experience Officer David Miller, Nurse Executive Helen Pearlman, CBOC medical director Clyde Markon, MD. (Director Patrick Kelly was attending a national VA meeting in Washington, DC.)

Rice Lake Clinic staff Dr. Srinivas Chetty and Nurse Manager Elizabeth Boissy also attended.

The majority of Veterans' comments focused on difficulties with the Veterans Choice Program. Veterans shared stories of spending hours on the phone trying to get appointments. Others said that private Community clinics do not want to work with VA because the Choice Program is frustrating and complicated.

VA leaders acknowledged the program, which is administered by a third-party, has problems, many of which are out of the control of the Minneapolis VA. CVSOs said they would like training on Choice so they can help Veterans in their communities.

Another topic of discussion was the inability of Veterans to call directly into clinics to talk with their providers. VA staff explained that the central Call Center had nurses available 24/7 to respond to questions. Dr. Markon noted that when he is practicing in clinic, it is difficult to break away from a patient to answer an outside phone call.

VA leaders remained after the Town Hall to respond to individual situations of patients.

There was some good news for the future of Rice Lake clinic. Long range plans call for the clinic to offer audiology and other specialty services. A proposal has been submitted to VA Central Office in Washington. No timeline is set, according to Dr. Markon, but he indicated that the goal is to add services in FY2017.

CVSOs and several Veterans praised the care they receive at the Rice Lake and Hayward community clinics.

VA Secretary Bob McDonald initiated the nationwide town halls at all VA medical centers in September 2014 as a way to gather feedback from veterans and their families,

Minneapolis VA will hold its next Town Hall in Minneapolis in December 2015. Details on time and place will be posted on the VA Internet site. Previous town halls have been held in Rochester, Duluth and Minneapolis. The purpose is to hear directly from Veterans.