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Attachments:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

VHA needs to strengthen emergency preparedness at local level

WASHINGTON (June 23, 2010) - While the Veterans Health Administration is well prepared at the national level to handle emergencies, it needs to improve its degree of preparedness at the local level, according to The American Legion.

Barry Searle, director of the Legion's veterans affairs and rehabilitation division, told a congressional subcommittee today that "there may be a lack of oversight and feedback concerning preparedness" at Dept. of Veterans Affairs regional offices and local facilities.

Noting that VHA has a well-organized training framework for identifying duties and responsibilities during emergencies, Searle said The American Legion found no evidence of any feedback mechanism to confirm that such training was being implemented at regional and local facilities.

"Disaster preparedness and response cannot be trained and implemented in a short period of time," Searle told the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation. He said greater emphasis should be placed on the reporting of exercises and training at the local level "to ensure a quick and effective response."

Last fall, The American Legion gave VHA high marks for its efforts in preparing for a possible pandemic of the H1N1 flu virus. Besides stockpiling vaccines, VHA adapted some of its vehicles used for veterans outreach counseling (equipped with satellite communications) to conduct medical relief operations.

Searle recounted how VHA dispatched three mobile vet centers for use as triage clinics in Fargo, N.D., during the massive flooding last year. While the effort was commendable, American Legion field officers found out later that some directors of VA medical facilities were unaware that the "mobile clinics" even existed.

"Such a valuable resource must be part of the ingrained knowledge of any facility director, or the value of these tools will be lost," Searle told the committee.

During its site visits, The American Legion also found a lack of awareness at many local VA facilities that they must also be prepared in emergencies to help civilians who are not veterans.

While The American Legion believes VHA is succeeding in its emergency preparedness at the national level, Searle said that more follow-up and reporting on training activities at the local level "is essential to ensure that the central office policies actually reach the ground level."

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