

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Under questioning from U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, Department of Veterans' Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson today acknowledged that he is "unaware" that appointments for veterans receiving care for post-traumatic stress disorder ("PTSD") may be delayed up to 90 days.

Nicholson's claim that he is "unaware" of the wait veteran PTSD patients endure demonstrates his lack of familiarity with what his own department has told the General Accounting Office.

Just two months ago, the GAO reported that "VA may face a challenge in meeting the demand for PTSD services. VA officials estimated that follow-up appointments for veterans receiving care for PTSD may be delayed up to 90 days." [Source: General Accounting Office Report, March 5, 2007]

"I'm very disappointed that the Secretary isn't aware of many of the problems our veterans experience every day," said Mitchell. "He should be. These reports aren't new. They've been in the news media for years now. But instead of using its resources to fix the problems, VA is rewarding senior officials with lavish bonuses. Those are the wrong priorities."

During the hearing, Mitchell questioned Nicholson about the May 3 Associated Press report that top Department of Veterans Affairs officials were paid the "most lucrative" bonuses in government at the same time they may have "deliberately misled taxpayers" in an effort "to justify Bush administration cuts to health care amid a burgeoning Iraq war." [Source: Associated Press, May 3, 2007]

At the hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Nicholson said that despite reports of backlogs and delays in veterans' care, VA is "adequately staffed."

According to the Associated Press, "the backlog of claims ranges from between 400,000 to more than 600,000, with delays averaging 177 days." [Source: Associated Press, May 4, 2007]

Mitchell, who visited the Carl T. Hayden VA Medical Center in March, told Nicholson that officials he met with reported that the Phoenix facility is understaffed. Mitchell has repeatedly expressed concern that the facility is "underfunded and understaffed in the wake of the Iraq war." [Source: The Arizona Republic, April 13, 2007]