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Missoula Vets Meeting

Max S. Baucus

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Remarks for Missoula Vets Meeting  
Senator Max Baucus  
Doubletree Hotel, Missoula  
November 29, 2000

Thanks, everyone, for coming out on a cold morning to discuss the future of the VA health care system and the needs of Montana veterans.

Communication between vets, elected officials and the VA is critical, and I look forward to a fruitful discussion today. We had a similar meeting in Whitefish yesterday, and I was pleased with the result.

By the way, if any of you have specific questions about claims, benefits, etc., there are 3 experts from VA Montana in the room ready to speak with you.
Aside from that, I hope to keep this meeting focused on the VA health care system and how services to veterans can be improved.

So who are our veterans? Some are easy to recognize. They wear uniforms, medals, and ribbons. Most veterans, however, live among us quietly and anonymously.

A veteran is an elderly gentleman sitting on a park bench, who helped liberate a Nazi concentration camp.

A veteran is the service station mechanic, who showed extraordinary courage at the 38th parallel.
A veteran is the nurse taking care of newborns in a hospital nursery, who once bandaged bloody limbs at Da Nang (duh NANG).

A veteran is a POW, who once returned home to face a culture he didn't recognize and now finds himself able at last to tell his story to his adult children.

A veteran is a police officer driving her patrol car through the neighborhood, who spent six months in Saudi Arabia making sure armored personnel carriers didn't run out of fuel.
Our country's veterans have sacrificed a lot for our country. We must never overlook that sacrifice. And one way – one small way – we can show our appreciation for their noble endeavors, is to live up to our promise of quality health care.

To that end, I have invited the VA's top health care official to join us in discussing veterans' needs.

As you know, the VA health care system has changed a great deal in recent years, moving from essentially a hospital-based system to one in which vets outpatient visits are stressed.
The Missoula clinic has been open since 1997, and this year will receive an estimated 8600 visits, compared with about 6800 last year.

In the last fiscal year, nearly 19,500 Montana veterans received health care from the VA statewide, compared with just over 18,000 in the year previous -- an increase of over 7 percent.

But despite these improvements in access to care, we still have work to do. Efficiency is not an unmitigated good. Vets have told me that waiting times to get in the VA system are long, sometimes in the range of over 6 months.
I have also heard from vets frustrated that the VA cannot fill prescriptions from their primary care doctor.

I hope we can shed some light on some of these issues today, and have a good discussion about where to go from here.

So without further ado, let me introduce to you our special guest.

Dr. Thomas Garthwaite has been with the VA since 1995, and last May was nominated to be VA Under Secretary for Health, basically the CEO of VA health care.
On September 8 he was confirmed by the Senate, and next year will be responsible for a budget of $20.3 billion. He oversees 180,000 staff, 172 medical centers, over 650 ambulatory care and community based clinics and 134 nursing homes.

His is not an easy job, and I commend him for making it to Montana for his first site visit as Under Secretary for Health.

Let's give a Big Sky welcome to Dr. Thomas Garthwaite.