

February 28, 2007 - Decision to Silence Walter Reed Critics Would Be "Morally Reprehensible"

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Decision to Silence Walter Reed Critics Would Be "Morally Reprehensible"
Slaughter Responds to Reports of New Orders Limiting Press Access to Walter Reed and Veterans' Medical Facilities

Washington, DC - Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-NY-28), Chairwoman of the House Rules Committee, today responded to recent reports in the Air Force Times stating that soldiers recovering at Walter Reed have been told by officers that they are not to talk to the media, and that CNN and Discovery Channel projects focusing on Defense Department medical facilities have been put on hold by Pentagon officials.

The article also reported that some soldiers recovering at Walter Reed believe that new and unusual orders requiring them to be awake by 6 AM and ready for room inspections at 7 AM may be punitive in nature.

"Last Friday, Secretary of Defense Gates publicly stated that the situation at Walter Reed was, in his words, unacceptable," Rep. Slaughter said. "The accountability he seemed to embrace was demanded by common decency and welcomed by the public."

"The only acceptable course of action for our military and civilian leaders to take is to fully and openly address any and all concerns regarding veterans' facilities nation-wide," Congresswoman Slaughter continued. "Any attempt to silence the very soldiers who brought their own mistreatment to light, or to hide ongoing abuses from the public eye - if such attempts are occurring - would be morally reprehensible. It would be an abdication of one of the most fundamental responsibilities of our government: the protection of those who have fought to protect us."

"Secretary Gates should act on the same principals of accountability and responsibility he so recently advocated and address these reports immediately. As a nation, we need to be honest about the care our veterans are receiving. Their enormous sacrifice demands nothing less."

On February 20th, following an initial series of Washington Post articles detailing conditions at Walter Reed facilities, Rep. Slaughter sent a letter to Secretary Gates asking him to, "explain why the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, once the crown-jewel of military medicine, has become a bleak and frustrating place for our wounded soldiers to recover, and what the Army intends to do to restore the integrity of its medical system."

BACKGROUND

An article in Tuesday's Air Force Times stated that, "Soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center's Medical Hold Unit say they have been told they will wake up at 6 a.m. every morning and have their rooms ready for inspection at 7 a.m., and that they must not speak to the media."

The article further stated that, "The Pentagon also clamped down on media coverage of any and all Defense Department medical facilities, to include suspending planned projects by CNN and the Discovery Channel, saying in an e-mail to spokespeople: "It will be in most cases not appropriate to engage the media while this review takes place," referring to an investigation of the problems at Walter Reed.

During a press conference last Friday, Secretary of Defense Gates responded to recent reports on the state of disrepair plaguing Walter Reed recovery facilities. "The men and women recovering at Walter Reed and at other military hospitals have put their lives on the line and paid a considerable price for defending our country," the Secretary said. "They should not have to recuperate in substandard housing, nor should they be expected to tackle mountains of paperwork and bureaucratic processes during this difficult period for themselves and for their families. They battled our foreign enemies; they should not have to battle an American bureaucracy."

"With responsibility comes accountability," he added. "It is my strong belief that an organization with the enormous responsibilities of the Department of Defense must live by this principle of accountability at all levels."

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