

VA is changing, assistant secretary tells local group

By Paul J. Nyden

Staff writer

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs official L. Tammy Duckworth told a Charleston audience on Monday that the VA is in the process of "a major transformation."

Duckworth spoke during "CARE-NET: Caring Beyond the Yellow Ribbon," a day-long conference for veterans, held at the Blessed John XXIII Pastoral Center.

Duckworth, the VA assistant secretary for public affairs, talked about her personal experiences as an example of why reforms are needed within the VA to make it easier for other caregivers to gain quick access to veterans' medical records.

As a major in the Illinois National Guard, Duckworth co-pi-

loted an Army Blackhawk helicopter on a combat mission north of Baghdad in 2004 when the aircraft was struck by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Injured and bleeding profusely, Duckworth lost both her legs, as well as partial use of her right arm.

Duckworth spent time as a patient at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., before she returned to Illinois.

"When I went to my VA hospital at home, I had to wait three months to see a doctor. Then I only saw a PA [physician's assistant]. They made me take my clothes off to prove I had lost my legs.

"I had medical records from my surgeon . . . to prove I was an amputee," Duckworth said.

"As a soldier, I can access my

[medical] records on line. Yet that is not transferable to VA. We are going to fix that," Duckworth said. "This is about fixing a broken system."

Duckworth praised Ret. Army Gen. Eric Shinseki, the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs under the Obama administration.

"Gen. Shinseki served two tours in Vietnam and lost part of his foot as a young lieutenant. He is passionate about our troops."

The Rev. Ricardo Flippin, pastor at the New First Baptist Church in Kanawha City, hosted the main program.

Flippin, 68, who served in the U.S. Air Force for 21 years, is an example of problems with the VA.

While in Philadelphia, Flippin was diagnosed with prostate

cancer. A physician at the Philadelphia VA Hospital urged him to try pellet implants, which are less traumatic than surgery, chemotherapy or radiation.

The pellets did not work, and Flippin ended up bedridden for months. The VA Hospital in Huntington prescribed painkillers while his weight dropped to 109.

Later, The Ohio State University Medical Center discovered he had an internal radiation injury because in Philadelphia, the radioactive pellets were implanted in the wrong place.

The New York Times recently called the Philadelphia VA Hospital a "rogue cancer unit," never subjected to careful peer review and medical oversight.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller talked during the program about prob-

lems facing veterans, as well as the 280,000 people working for the Veterans Administration every day.

"They [the VA] have to change their direction. They need a new emphasis on PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], depression, and dealing with suicide. . . .

"We in Congress have been too slow to recognize the power of suffering that is not seen," said Rockefeller, a member of the Veterans Affairs Committee since he began serving in the Senate 24 years ago.

Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, presented a citation from state legislators thanking CARE-NET for helping West Virginians.

"We read stories about patients at Walter Reed. One of those patients, who committed

suicide by self-medication, was from the Eastern Panhandle," she said.

Fleischauer said the Legislature "had problems with the DOD [Department of Defense]. We couldn't get any information about our state."

As a result, the Legislature conducted its own survey, sending questionnaires to every veteran in West Virginia.

The survey found 48 percent of all West Virginia veterans suffered from depression or PTSD.

"We need to help people, especially people who are isolated in rural areas," she said.

For information about CARE-NET, log on to the group's Web site at www.carenetwv.org.

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