

Testimony of James Peifer before the

Little Hoover Commission

Thursday, June 22, 2017

I have sent two letters dated April 18, 2017 and May 1, 2017 as well as an email dated May 12, 2017 to Chairman Nava and members of the Commission detailing a significant number of concerns about the treatment of the Veterans at Yountville, their quality of life, the crumbling infrastructure, water contamination from the boiler system and the spraying of Glyphosate, the main ingredient of Agent Orange.

I also have included many solutions to the existing problems discovered.

I have sent copies of all of the correspondence and had a number of meetings with the offices of Congressman Thompson, State Senator Dodd and Assemblymember Aquilar-Curry in Napa, California.

Today, I would like to focus discussion on a number of areas that are very significant to the quality of life of the Veteran resident at Yountville as well as a new vision for the development of the Yountville campus.

Solutions to many of the problems and issues may not be financially overwhelming to fix and improve in a relatively short period of time.

**The areas of concern that are of the highest priority include:**

- 1) Stopping the inflow of new residents until infrastructure and safety issues are resolved and all Veterans are located in single rooms
- 2) Approach Silicon Valley based firms to partner and help modernize residential buildings and the Holderman Hospital
- 3) Modeling the Yountville campus after the federal facility in Palo Alto - in a way that the facility has integrated well with the local community.
- 4) Develop the Holderman Hospital and the entire Yountville campus into a major Treatment Center for Veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) to include state-wide Veterans.

## **STOPPING THE INFLOW OF NEW RESIDENTS**

- There have been many scientific studies over the perils of over-crowding including a famous study by John B. Calhoun in the 1970s.
- We have learned from Veterans who have had negative and sometimes dangerous experiences in small rooms with disturbed roommates only verifies the need for change here at Yountville.
- We have had our Veterans express renewed spirit and excitement towards life when they are able to live in a single room.
- Consider the average size of a prison cell for two people in the state of California is 9x12 feet. Compare this number meant for incarceration to the rooms at Yountville that are generally 14x14 feet. This results in a living space of 7x14 feet for each Veteran.

## **LIVING AT YOUNTVILLE SHOULD NOT BE TOLERATED AS A PUNISHMENT**

- All Veterans should be given the right to privacy in their own rooms.
- The majority of residents living at Yountville are dealing with physical and/or mental health issues that can be exacerbated by the stress of crowding. The Veterans, who average 80 years of age, are not young college students aspiring to live a dormitory life style. They are only asking for dignity, peace of mind and their own living space.

**I was provided a Department of Veterans Affairs document that details the unfortunate death of a resident at Yountville.**

**I am providing a copy of this document to the Commission for today's meeting.**

This document reports that Mrs M and her Veteran of World War II spouse were admitted to Yountville in 2012 and lived together in their own room until 2015. In 2015 Mrs M's spouse required a higher level of care and he was moved to a building for Veterans with higher level care needs.

Mrs M was well liked by many Veterans at Yountville, especially many wheelchair bound Veterans.

Mrs M had been diagnosed to be suffering from severe depression by the Yountville facility Psychologist.

A fellow resident and friend of Mrs M is quoted in the report to say that Mrs M felt pressure to hurry and move from the room she had shared with her spouse, and that she became hysterical about moving to a different building. The fellow resident said that the administration did not give Mrs M enough time to grieve the move of her spouse before having to either accept a roommate, or move to another building.

The Section Leader reported that she was on duty the weekend when Mrs M informed her on that Saturday that she had moved two boxes over to the new building. After moving the boxes to the new

building Mrs M sat on the floor and began to cry because she hated it there. The Section Leader said that Mrs M did not make eye contact with her during their conversation.

Later, Mrs M was found dead from an apparent suicide by the County Sheriff's office.

In the Veterans Affairs report the Supervising Physician is quoted to have said that "this situation should have been referred to a Psychologist, and required immediate intervention".

### **APPROACHING SILICON VALLEY BASED FIRMS TO PARTNER AND HELP MODERNIZE THE RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS AND THE HOLDERMAN HOSPITAL**

- There are a number of Veterans at Yountville that have extensive experience in building construction of commercial buildings and even licensed architects that have advised me that the current residential buildings could easily be reconfigured to first floor living .
- The second story of the resident buildings would be used for storage of Veteran's personal belongings, inventory of key equipment parts, inventory of janitorial supplies, storage of administration archives, offices for very mobile daytime workers and many other uses of newly created space.
- Reconfigured buildings would eliminate elevators as a problem of Veteran usage, frequent malfunctioning, very expensive costs and unreasonable downtime. Fire and earthquake risk to the Veteran resident would be reduced substantially. Cost of air conditioning, heat and maintenance could be reduced by as much as 50%.
- A vacant residential building and vacant floors of the Holderman Hospital would take the overflow of Veterans relocated from the reconfigured buildings.
- A Development Team comprising of resident Veterans, CalVet management and local political staff members could create a "Marketing Program" to approach Silicon Valley based firms to partner with Yountville in modernizing the resident buildings and the Holderman Hospital.
- Participating Silicon Valley firms would be provided the opportunity to install the latest technology in the reconfigured buildings and the Holderman Hospital. Incentives for the participating firms would include the use of their logos on the buildings and the rights to publicize and promote their involvement in partnering with the Veterans. Tax incentives might be available to the firms for constructing new buildings for the Veteran's use.
- During the reconfiguring of the existing residential buildings "partner firms" could be building at least two new single level buildings for the Veterans.

\*A Veteran resident, who is also a licensed architect, consulted for a Silicon Valley firm in the last four years and built a two story, 80,000 square foot building, in eight months from initial drawings to final

completion. It could be possible to accomplish the same result if "partner firms" were free to construct buildings for the Veterans utilizing their construction and procurement in-house talent.

- As mentioned in my previous letters, Silicon Valley firms would welcome participation in major projects for the Veterans since almost all of the firms compete with each other in federal and state contracts for the government procurement of their technology and services.

### **MODELING THE YOUNTVILLE CAMPUS AFTER THE FEDERAL FACILITY IN PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA**

- The Palo Alto VA is located in a very beautiful part of the state as is the Yountville Veterans home. Real estate is very expensive and the local community welcomes the integration of the VA with the local community.

- The VA hospital has collaborated with the Stanford University Medical School and Stanford students are trained by the hospital doctors daily interfacing with the Veteran patients. It is common to see as many as three doctors making their rounds together accompanied by as many as eight or nine medical students. The students are able to learn about many different health issues and treatments with the expert physicians that they follow.

- The Palo Alto VA maintains a high level professional culture displaying the highest respect for the dignity of the Veteran patient. All level of employees from the maintenance worker to the physician specialist demonstrate respect and caring for the Veterans. This high level professional culture must find its way to the Yountville campus.

- The Yountville Veterans Home should be integrated with the town of Yountville and the local residents and businesses. The Yountville Cemetary should seek national recognition and be a place for locals and tourists to visit and appreciate the extrodinary history of the Veterans who have lived there.

### **DEVELOPING THE HOLDERMAN HOSPITAL AND THE ENTIRE YOUNTVILLE CAMPUS INTO A MAJOR TREATMENT CENTER FOR VETERANS STATE-WIDE**

- With the continuing War on Terror and the killing and wounding of civilians throughout the world by Terrorists, on almost a weekly basis, the need for the military to fight Terrorism will be necessary for many years to come. This type of warfare creates wounds to the fighting soldiers that include the long-term suffering with PTSD.

- This Treatment Center would be developed to be available to all state-wide Veterans suffering from PTSD.

- The Treatment Center and Hospital would also be available to the 11,000 Veterans living in Napa County as a VA Health Center to service their needs. Currently, all Napa County Veterans must travel outside the county for VA health treatment and services.

After the campus has been rejuvenated with updated living conditions and the establishment of the highest quality of life for the Veteran, new admissions should have a new priority program. When admissions resume the first priority should be to the Combat Veteran as determined by their DD214 record.

Combat Veterans of all wars have been exposed to the greatest dangers, injuries and suffering and should be the first to be considered and accepted to the Yountville Veterans Home.