

# BEST PRACTICES

HOUSE REPUBLICAN CONFERENCE  
Vice Chair Lynn Jenkins

## *Action Items*

**Staff:**  
Communications,  
District, Policy

**Targeted Audience:**  
Veterans

**Top Points:**  
Builds relationships with veterans  
Helps office stay informed and get advice on Veterans issues

## *Member Office Contact*

**Name:**  
Matt Becker  
**Email:**  
Standard  
**Number:**  
(202) 430-3908

## Veterans Advisory Board Presented by the Office of Kevin Cramer (ND-AL)

### How it works:

- ❖ The Veterans Advisory Board is made up of leaders in the veterans' advocacy world. Rep. Cramer's board has a Medal of Honor recipient, a Purple Heart recipient, the State Veterans Commissioner, the Women and Minority Veterans Coordinator, a National Guard colonel, a former VFW State Commander, and a county veterans service officer.
- ❖ The board meets every few months in a roundtable format. Rep. Cramer's board small enough to allow all members to actively participate in the conversation. We are open to a theme for a meeting, but usually there are four or five hot button issues (employment, VA, etc.) that dominate the conversation. The Congressman offers a topic and then it turns into a conversation. An action plan concludes the meeting.
- ❖ The group provides a sounding board for proposed veterans bills. The recent legislation allowing veterans to get care if they live 40 miles from a VA is an example. These are the people who navigate the state and speak to state veterans every day. They know the issues better than anyone because they deal with them all the time.

### The Benefits:

- ❖ The board meetings help the Congressman flesh out controversial issues including the recent VA scandals. What are they hearing? Where do they think improvements are needed?
- ❖ The board helps the Congressman's efforts to network and communicate with state veterans.
- ❖ The board helps keep our office informed of veterans' events in the state.
- ❖ The board has helped with complex casework. They have directed staff to the correct resources and personnel in trying to solve complicated veterans casework.
- ❖ It also provides a great opportunity for press. See article on back.

## **Distance, access to records hinder medical care, say veterans, congressman**

[Grand Forks Herald](#)

**Kevin Bonham**

VILS LAKE — Rep. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., vowed Monday to work toward making the proposed 40-mile rule — legislation intended to ease long waiting lists for veterans seeking medical care in some parts of the country — relevant to North Dakotans.

Both houses of Congress passed similar bills last week in the aftermath of a national uproar over scheduling backlogs and other problems facing the Veterans Affairs department.

The 40-mile rule establishes a two-year program to allow veterans living more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility to see the doctor of their choice. The Senate version calls for building 26 new VA medical facilities around the country.



“The spotlight’s on the VA right now, but it’s broader than that,” Cramer told members of his Veterans Advisory Board in a meeting in Devils Lake. “This is our moment. We have to pounce on it and make sure that we’re addressing the very real issues facing veterans and their health care.”

The board includes representatives of state military and veterans offices and organizations, as well as retired Army Staff Sgt. Clinton Romesha, a Minot resident and Medal of Honor recipient who was injured during a 2009 firefight in Afghanistan, and Russell “Rusty” Ouart, Fargo, an Iraqi War veteran and Purple Heart recipient who was injured in 2008.

“One of my early frustrations has been the distance issue,” Cramer told members of his Veterans Advisory Board here. “Forty miles is nothing in North Dakota. We’ve got veterans that have to travel more than 300 miles to get to the VA hospital in Fargo.”

### **Ahead of the issue**

North Dakota has addressed some of the distance problems over the past couple of decades by opening veterans’ clinics throughout the state.

Besides the Fargo VA medical center, the state has community-based outpatient clinics in Grand Forks, Grafton, Jamestown, Minot, Bismarck, Dickinson and Williston.

A new Devils Lake Veterans Telehealth Clinic is scheduled to open in mid- to late-July in Mercy Hospital.

Romesha and Ouart said access to military medical records is a major roadblock to receiving treatment. They said the Department of Defense and VA lack a system to share such information.

“I requested my medical records a year and a half before I got out,” Romesha said, adding that he didn’t receive them for more than a year after returning home. Ouart said he never did receive his military medical records.

“If all the records are digitized, why can’t they be shared, so we don’t have this problem,” North Dakota Veterans Affairs Commissioner Lonnie Wangen asked.

They also discussed ways to improve access and cooperation between veteran and nonveteran health care facilities and the need for qualified counselors throughout the state. “In North Dakota, anyone can put out a shingle and say they counsel veterans. They don’t have to be qualified,” said Brenda Bergsrud, veterans coordinator and benefits specialist for the North Dakota Veterans Affairs.