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Your Weather



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**EDUCATION:** Bombers of the month and more **PG. 9**

## WINNER!



Mia Johnson, a 3rd grader at Drayton Public School, won the Ice Bag Cover Contest with a fantastic brushed flannel piece. Mia is the daughter of Yvonne Johnson, who also works at the school. She and her mom are already measuring and cutting more covers. Mia won the prize of \$25.00. Congratulations Mia!

## Proposed VA staffing cuts have ND veterans worried

Current excellent care could erode, they say

By Michael Standaert, North Dakota News Cooperative

Expected cuts of between 70,000 to over 80,000 workers from U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to bring staffing down to 2019 levels by the end of August have some North

Dakota veterans concerned that care could erode.

The Associated Press reported on the cuts on March 5 after obtaining an internal memo that detailed 83,000 potential VA positions to eliminate.

In a video statement later that day, VA Secretary Doug Collins said the department is expected to cut around 15% of staff, or about 72,000 positions. Collins said the department can reduce its workforce without impacting veteran health care or benefits.

A primary concern of many veterans is that the loss of support staff or efforts to push more veterans to community care could significantly increase wait times and reduce the quality of care.

Most said the care under the VA now is excellent and doctors, nurses and other staff under the VA system are better attuned to their circumstances.

### VA expansion led to more coverage

The VA expanded during the Biden administration after the 2022 PACT Act covered veterans impacted by burn pits, Agent Orange and other toxic substances during their duty.

Howard Tweeten of Bismarck said the VA wouldn't have covered his health care without the PACT Act because family earnings were too high for him to qualify. In recent years, he's experienced heart trouble and has been using the VA since the expansion covered him.

Tweeten served in the U.S. Army as a combat photographer between 1969 and 1971 primarily near the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea.

Under the PACT Act, the VA presumes anyone stationed in a unit along the DMZ who served between 1967 and 1971 was exposed to Agent Orange used to reduce vegetation in the zone to more easily detect North Korean infiltrations.



"They sprayed Agent Orange on us in Korea too, but they'd never admitted it (before the PACT Act)," Tweeten said. "So they finally admitted it and got the PACT Act through, so I did qualify."

One concern for Tweeten and others is that wait times could increase, pushing veterans to community care.

Current wait times for most care at Bismarck Veterans Clinic and Fargo Veterans Medical Center are minimal compared to community care. Under law the VA is required to publish average waiting time data online.

For example, a cardiology appointment can be made four to eight days out at either the Bismarck or Fargo facility. For community-based care, the average wait is around 26 days, according to national data.

For mental health appointments, wait times average three to eight days at the main North Dakota facilities. Nationally, 69 percent of psychologists reported their wait times at three months or longer, according to a 2023 survey from the American Psychological Association.

"They've been great," Tweeten said of his care at the VA in North Dakota. "They keep track of me, they text me and make sure I know I have to be here or I have to be there."

In 2024, the VA had its highest-ever service levels, with over 9 million veterans enrolled, according to agency data.

Rick Pinnick, currently living in Moorhead, served in the Air Force in 1972 and 1973, mostly operating out of U-Tapao Air Base where B-52's flew out of. He later served with the North Dakota Army National Guard.

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## End of an era

By Christine Jensen

Edward Albert wrote, "The simple act of caring is heroic." For doctors and nurses alike, who have spent their lives caring for patients and maintaining integrity for their work and ethical standards through helping people, those words maintain a special symbolism for their life's work.

Dr. Mark Carter was living and working in Canada when he decided to look for another position. During that time the US federal government wanted to boost rural health care. An administrator heard he was looking and contacted him. An airplane was sent for him and he went to Grand Forks as well as Drayton to take a look at the facilities

"It was mainly suppose to be an educational project," Carter said. "I agreed to take the job and had various administrative things to do."

He said during that time, the government decided to pull the funding so they never really got going on the project. At that time he was living and working in Grafton and after approximately eighteen months, he decided to look for another position. The Grand Forks Clinic took him on and so he made arrangements to move to Grand Forks.

"I felt like it was tough on Drayton to not have services and I felt a commitment to the community," Carter said. "So I negotiated to work a few days in Drayton. I had a lot on my plate at that time so a few other physicians also went to Drayton."

He said Marie Anderson wanted to work with him and followed him for a while. He said she seemed like a really good person and eventually the clinic became a full time service for the community under his direction and the entire staff's work ethics.

"I did spend a lot of emotional and political consideration to keep it going," Carter said. "It ended up being a significant part of my career."

He said the X-Ray machine at the clinic back then was old and they needed a new one. He was capital budget chairman at that time and was in charge of getting equipment. Through his dedication, the clinic was able to get a new machine.

"I explained what Drayton was and what we needed," Carter said. "I was driving a hard bargain. They eventually gave us a machine for free."

He said before the flood of 1997, he knew Drayton was vulnerable and so he had the machine dismantled and put in a storage unit so it was safe.

"After the flood the Drayton clinic was kind of a sick building and there was a lot of issues but at least we were able to save the X-Ray machine," Carter said.

Eventually Altru Clinic would move to a new facility on the north side of town and continue running for the next three decades.

According to Dr. Carter, as a physician, he was focused on high standards in what he was able to provide. He said he wanted to make sure there was a

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## Family Fun Night held at DPS



High school students helped with a limbo contest in the halls during Drayton School's family night. Photo by Jamie Rarick



Chalk the halls was a hit at Drayton School's family night. Photo by Jamie Rarick

More Family Night pics, page 9

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