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Isakson talks VA care with Vietnam vets

The ongoing overhaul of the Veterans Administration means service is becoming better, but there is still much work to be done, U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson said during a stop in Dunwoody to speak to Vietnam vets.

Isakson, chair of the of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, told the group gathered for the Jan. 5 Atlanta Vietnam Veterans Business Association lunch meeting that significant strides have been made in fixing the system plagued with scandal, including a veteran committing suicide inside the Atlanta VA Medical Center.

"I'm proud of what we're doing with the VA. We're doing better and better every day," Isakson told the more than 100 people attending the meeting at Dunwoody United Methodist Church.

But a few of the veterans attending the meeting said they are not seeing improvements. One told Isakson he had a claim take three years before he finally wrote letters to Isakson and U.S. Sen. David Perdue and then got immediate help.

"What I was told is because I got Congressional input, my claim was moved to the top. I got my claim taken care of less than 15 days, after taking more than three years," he said.

Isakson said Congressional intervention should not be needed, "But if that's necessary, make sure to call."

Another vet said he had been to several VA hospitals across the country and "by far Atlanta is the worst."

"I was there for six weeks last year after surgery. From a vet's perspective, it's not a better system," he said. "I don't know how you say it is better."

The Atlanta VA Medical Center, located in DeKalb County, "is a mess," Isakson acknowledged. "But it is better. We are improving. We have a long way to go. And I welcome criticism."

In 2013, an audit by the Department of Veteran Affairs' Inspector General found that three deaths occurred at the Atlanta VA Medical Center after officials there did not keep track of mental health patients.

Months-long waiting lists for vets seeking medical care and mismanagement led to a serious overhaul of the VA over the past several years. In 2014, President Obama brought in Robert McDonald to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs and try to turn the agency around, a decision Isakson called a "good one."

Leslie Wiggins, who was named director of the VA Southeast Network in November after serving as the director of the Atlanta VA Medical Center for two years, also was praised by Isakson.

"If you set a standard, people will rise to it. If you don't, people will sink," he said.

Isakson also discussed the war against ISIL. He explained that the name "ISIL" — not "ISIS" — is used now because the war was first against the Islamic State of Syria, but now is against the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, which includes Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel and Jordan.

"We have a strategy. I think it's lousy. And it's to wait it out," he said. Isakson said if he was president, his response would be to "kill them first."

"They are fanatics of a hijacked religion," he told the crowd to a roar of applause. "We have got to kill every one of them as fast as we can. You can't negotiate with them."

— *Dyana Bagby*