

Veterans care comes under fire

Walz calls for investigation; Coleman cites 'human error'

By Mark Fischenich
Free Press Staff Writer

On the day the general in charge of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center was fired, Congressman Tim Walz called for an investigation of whether Veterans Affairs medical centers are overburdened.

Walz, a retired command sergeant major with the Army National Guard, also said the

Bush administration has failed to plan for and properly fund the necessary services for soldiers returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Republican Sen. Norm Coleman countered that the money has been there, but that "human error" mistakes have been made.

"America's veterans have sacrificed a great deal for this country," Walz wrote in a let-

ter to Rep. Bob Filner, the chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee on which Walz serves. "Congress must exercise its oversight power to ensure they are receiving the best possible care."

The freshman Democrat from Mankato said in a telephone conference call that the Bush administration, as in other aspects of preparing for

the war in Iraq, failed to recognize the demands that returning vets would place on the VA.

"Very little planning has been done for the backside of this war and the 50-year commitment we need to make (to returning soldiers)," Walz said. "... This administration just refuses to look at reality."

Coleman, who also spoke to reporters Thursday, said he



Republican Sen. Norm Coleman (left) and Democratic Congressman Tim Walz (right) share some concerns, with some disagreement, regarding veterans care.

too has "deep, deep, deep concern" about reports of poor conditions and a bureaucratic jungle that returning vets have faced while receiving services

Please see VETS, Page B3

VETS: Bush responsibility debated

Continued from Page B1

at Walter Reed.

In addition, Coleman said better outpatient care is required for returning veterans, and more immediate assistance is needed for veterans suffering from mental illness related to their war service. He noted the recent suicide of a returning Minnesota veteran who had unsuccessfully sought psychiatric help.

"We've obviously got to do a better job with mental health services," Coleman said. But he disagreed that the Bush administration is to blame and specifically rejected the idea that VA funding has been inadequate, saying

overall funding for veterans has risen substantially.

"The dollars have been put there," Coleman said. "I think there have been some human errors."

Walz pointed to a pair of Bush proposals to illustrate his assertion that the administration isn't doing right by America's soldiers.

The latest Bush budget proposal calls for a slight reduction in VA medical and prosthetics research at a time when a surge of veterans with amputated limbs are returning from the war, Walz said.

And Bush's budget calls for higher fees to be paid by

veterans for some services. Walz said that's the equivalent of a tax hike even though many veterans have contributed mightily during their war service.

"I'm not willing to support a tax increase on wounded veterans," Walz said. "... They paid every price of admission to get into this system and be treated fairly."

Coleman said it would be better for members of Congress to avoid criticism of the Republican president and focus on solving problems with veterans services.

"Let's not make this a political issue, a partisan issue," Coleman said.