

STATEMENT OF
DAVID J. SHULKIN, M.D.
UNDER SECRETARY FOR HEALTH
VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION (VHA)
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)
BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
APRIL 19, 2016

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Brown, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the efforts that VHA has taken to improve access to care for Veterans. I am accompanied today by Dr. Thomas Lynch, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Clinical Operations and Dr. Poonam Alai, Senior Medical Advisor.

The year 2014 was one of the most significant times in VA's history. To say that we had a crisis on our hands would be an understatement. After losing the trust of the Nation, and most importantly, Veterans, we had to look at every basic principle of operating a health care system. Without the appropriate data, we were unable to truly understand how much space, staff, and other resources were really needed.

When I first entered this office approximately 9 months ago, I began to realize that the access issues had been slowly building up for many years and that correcting those issues had to be addressed systematically, rather than piecemeal. We needed to

re-design and re-launch our approach to access in order to provide the care for Veterans that they have earned and deserved.

As a whole, VA is working to rebuild trust with Veterans and the American people, improve service delivery, and set the course for long-term VA excellence and reform, while delivering better access to care. This initiative is called MyVA. All of us in the VA health care system are focused on the MyVA initiative.

To ensure that VHA remains aligned with MyVA, I developed five priorities that are the focus of VHA. My first priority is to fix the access issues and continue to work on reducing the wait time for Veterans who need our services. In order to do this, we need to get the right leaders in place at VHA who understand that it is their job to take care of Veterans. We also need to change the way that we measure wait times and put in place a new system for how we see Veterans that focuses on the clinical urgency.

Immediate Steps – Addressing Urgent Care Needs

VA's ability to improve access to care and improve the Veterans' experience is tied directly to how we meet the urgent health needs of our Veterans. We must identify who needs the help the most and commit to treating those Veterans who have clinically urgent needs as soon as possible. As long as there is even a single Veteran with an urgent care need that we are not meeting in a timely fashion, we will not be satisfied. That is why VHA hosted two National Access Stand Down events – one on November 14, 2015, and a second on February 27, 2016 – at all VA Medical Centers. The immediate goal of the first event was to connect with Veterans that have urgent health care needs; address their needs; and reduce the number of Veterans waiting greater

than 30 days for urgent care. This initiative ensured coordinated efforts to increase access to health care by:

- Maximizing the opportunities for “same day” appointments as much as possible;
- Getting timely and convenient care, referrals and information from any VA medical center, not just the Veteran’s preferred VA care facility; and
- Ensuring Veterans see their provider within 30 days of their preferred date or date of clinical need.

The February 27, 2016 event resulted in VA reviewing the records of more than 80,000 Veterans to get those waiting for urgent care off wait lists. Approximately 93 percent of Veterans waiting for urgent care were contacted. Since not every type of clinic appointment has the same urgency, or the same medical risk to the patient in the event of delay, we focused on addressing the highest priority needs first. Both of these events proved to be a success, and the goal is to keep the momentum going. We also know that it will take much more to fix access issues and achieve the goal of providing Veterans same day access for primary care.

Declaration of Access

The focused Access Stand Down events in November 2015, and February 2016, have addressed Veterans with urgent needs and significantly reduced the number of Veterans waiting for care. Moving forward, we developed the “MyVA Access Declaration,” a set of foundational principles for every VHA employee to improve and ensure access to care. The MyVA Access Declaration is our pledge to improve access

to care for Veterans by committing to a list of access improvements. This list of principles will be distributed to VHA staff and VHA leadership and staff will hold themselves responsible for meeting these commitments over the course of the next year.

We aspire to provide access to care based on the following core principles:

- Provide timely care including same-day access in Primary Care, as needed;
- Respond to routine clinical inquiries within 2 business days;
- Offer follow-up appointments upon the Veteran leaving the clinic;
- Involve Veterans in the process of making or canceling appointments;
- Not cancel clinic appointments without appropriate Veteran notification and rescheduling;
- Integrate community providers as needed to enhance access;
- Offer Veterans extended clinic hours, and/or virtual care options, such as Tele-Health, when appropriate; and
- Transparently report to the public and manage access to care data for Veterans.

The MyVA Access' goal for 2016 is when a Veteran calls or visits primary care at a VHA Medical Center, their clinical needs will be addressed that day. It is important for Veterans to be in control of their healthcare. We are changing our old systems that have been in place for decades at VA to a system that works for Veterans and is focused on contemporary practices in access. This initiative and the Declaration represent VA's pledge to improve access to care for all Veterans seeking VA health

services. MyVA Access will ensure coordination of initiatives and their rapid deployment to meet the access needs of Veterans at VA medical centers.

Moving toward long-term transformation, VHA has already implemented a number of actions to address access, quality and patient satisfaction within the larger transformation of MyVA. Within the 12 Breakthrough Priorities laid out by Secretary McDonald, 2 focus squarely on health care outcomes, specifically improving access to care and improving community care. Since the introduction of the MyVA initiative, VA has made significant progress in improving access to health care:

- Nationally, VA completed more than 57.36 million appointments from March 1, 2015, through February 29, 2016. This represents an increase of 1.6 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2014 through 2015.
- VHA and Choice contractors created over 3 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from February 1, 2015, through January 31, 2016. This represents a 12 percent increase in authorizations when compared to the same period in 2014 through 2015.
- From fiscal year (FY) 2014 to FY 2015, Community Care appointments increased approximately 20 percent from 17.7 million in FY 2014 to 21.3 million in FY 2015.
- VA completed 96.46 percent of appointments in February 2016, within 30 days of clinically indicated or Veteran's preferred date.
- VA continues to expand and improve the VCL, which has answered nearly 2 million calls since its launch in 2007. Nearly 490,000 calls, or a quarter of

these 2 million calls, were answered during the last fiscal year. VCL responders dispatched emergency responders to callers in crisis over 11,000 times last year - over 53,000 times since 2007.

- VHA has increased net onboard staff by over 17,000 employees since the beginning of FY15 through February 29, 2016. This includes over 6,000 nurses (RN, LPN & NA), 1,550 physicians, 112 psychiatrists, and 450 psychologists.
- Women Veterans Call Center (WVCC), created to contact women Veterans to inform them about eligible services. As of February 2016, WVCC received 30,399 incoming calls and made 522,038 outbound calls, successfully reaching 278,238 women Veterans.
- In FY 2015, VA activated 2.2 million square feet of space for clinical, mental health, long-term care, and associated support facilities to care for Veterans.
- VA increased its total clinical work (direct patient care) by 10 percent over the last 2 years as measured by private sector standards (relative value units). This increase translates to roughly 20 million additional provider hours of care for our Veterans.
- VHA offers an extensive community provider network of over 257,000 providers through the Patient-Centered Community Care/Choice Programs and more are joining each month.
- VA Telehealth services are critical to expanding access to VA care in more than 45 clinical areas.

- In FY 2015, 12 percent of all Veterans enrolled for VA care received Telehealth based care. This includes 2.14 million telehealth visits, touching 677,000 Veterans.

Veteran Experience – Veteran Satisfaction

The ability to describe wait times does not exist anywhere outside of the VA, so there is no standard on how to report wait times. We have gone to such lengths to make sure that we document every aspect of wait time data that we have developed a system that is too complex and has proven too confusing to Veterans, our employees, and Congress. Although the data may be accurate, they do not reflect the actual Veteran experience. Therefore, we have decided to use a singular measure – asking Veterans, our customers – whether they were satisfied with being able to get care when they need it. VHA currently utilizes sign-in kiosks at VA facilities all across the country to assess patient satisfaction, of those Veterans who obtained appointments, with their ability to get their appointment when they wanted it. Eighty-nine percent of Veterans were completely satisfied or satisfied with their ability to get care when they wanted it.

As the Under Secretary, I want to ensure that we can say there are no Veterans who need care now who are not receiving it. We are not fully there yet, but that is the direction to which we are moving.

Legislative Priorities

VA is grateful for your continuing support of Veterans and appreciates your efforts to pass legislation enabling VA to provide Veterans with the high-quality care

they have earned and deserve. As the Department focuses on ways to help provide access to health care across the country, we have identified a number of necessary legislative items that require action by Congress in order to best serve Veterans.

Flexible budget authority would allow VA to avoid artificial restrictions that impede our delivery of care and benefits to Veterans. Currently, there are over 70 line items in VA's budget that dedicate funds to a specific purpose without adequate flexibility to provide the best service to Veterans. These include limitations within the same general areas, such as health care funds that cannot be spent on health care needs and funding that can be used for only one type of Care in the Community program, but not others. These restrictions limit the ability of VA to deliver Veterans with care and benefits based on demand, rather than specific funding lines.

VA also requests your support for legislation that would allow VA to contract with providers on an individual basis in the community outside of Federal Acquisition Regulations, and includes explicit protections for procurement integrity, provider qualifications, price reasonableness and employment protections. Such legislation will ensure that VA is able to provide local care to Veterans in a timely and responsible manner. VA would support language that addresses concerns related to employment nondiscrimination and equal employment protections. We would have strong concerns with any legislative language, such as that currently being considered by this committee, that rolls back employment protections. VA further requests your support for our efforts to recruit and retain the very best clinical professionals. These include, for example, flexibility for the Federal work period requirement, which is not consistent with

private sector medicine, and special pay authority to help VA recruit and retain the best talent possible to lead our hospitals and health care networks.

Conclusion

VA is committed to providing timely access to Veterans as determined by their clinical needs. VA Medical Centers will be making sweeping changes over the next several months to realize the goal of same-day access for our Veteran population. We realize the significant work that remains ahead. The good news is that moving forward, along with Congress, we have an opportunity to reshape the future and make long-lasting valuable changes. We also look forward to the Commission on Care recommendations to inform or planning and execution. We appreciate Congress' support and look forward to responding to any questions you may have.