

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**SEPTEMBER 20, 2016**

Good Morning, Chairman Miller, Acting Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss quality of care, infrastructure, leasing, and contract issues at the Northport VA Medical Center (VAMC). I am accompanied today by Mr. Philip Moschitta, Medical Center Director at Northport VAMC.

I was appointed as the Network Director of the Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 2 VA New York/New Jersey Network in May 2016. I am a Board certified Emergency Medicine/Internal Medicine physician with 24 years of experience at major Level I Emergency Departments (EDs) in the public sector in New York. I joined VA in 2011, as Chief Medical Officer of VISN 3. As the proud daughter of a World War II Veteran, I am honored to bring my experience and skills to our Veteran patients. Mr. Moschitta, the brother of a Vietnam Era Veteran and nephew of a World War II Veteran, began his VA career 44 years ago as a kinesiologist treating disabled Veterans. Since being appointed Director nearly eight years ago, he has witnessed the unmatched passion and dedication with which Northport's employees deliver care. The Northport VAMC has long had a strong reputation for caring for

31,500 Veterans within its Long Island catchment area, who come to us each year for care.

### **Access**

Nationally, between August 2015 and July 2016, VA completed approximately 57.46 million appointments in VA facilities. This is 830,000 more appointments than the 56.63 million that VA completed in the same period the year prior, and almost 2.9 million more appointments than the same timeframe two years prior. Eighty-five percent of Veterans are seen within seven days of their clinically indicated date, 96 percent within 30 days, and 22 percent are actually completed on the same day.

Since April 2014, VA has hired 7,366 more physicians, 25,849 more nurses, and 57,870 additional staff nationwide. This means we have hired a net total of 26,392 employees -- a 9 percent increase. This includes a net increase of 2,332 physicians or 10.3 percent, and a net increase of 6,818 nurses, or 11.6 percent. We also activated approximately 2.2 million square feet of clinical and support space, including long-term care facilities. Physician productivity is up 11.3 percent, which translates to an additional 7.4 million hours of care. Between October and June, we increased authorizations for community care by 458,386, or 20 percent, from the same period the prior year. We have established four new regional tele-mental health hubs, and are expanding tele-primary care hubs to further expand access.

Even as VA's efficiency rises, Veterans need more services from VA than ever before. At the Northport VAMC, outpatient visits have increased 3.1 percent and appointments for female Veterans have increased 8.4 percent over the past two years. In fiscal year (FY) 2016 to date, Northport VAMC completed over 318,000 outpatient appointments with 99.2 percent of them within 30 days of the Veteran's preferred date. In fact, the average wait time for a mental health appointment is less than 2 days and Northport outperforms the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile in providing outpatient urgent Mental Health Care. Specialty Care access is at 98.4 percent within 30 days. New Primary Care, Specialty Care, and Mental Health Care appointments are completed within 30 days and exceed the 90th percentile.

VA's FY 2016, quarter 2 outpatient access surveys show that 93 percent of Northport's Veterans always or usually got a routine primary care appointment as soon as they needed. For routine specialty care, this number is 89 percent. Northport's outpatient satisfaction scores are in the top 25 percent of VA facilities for 5 out of 7 satisfaction composite areas.

To expand access of services to our Veterans, Northport VAMC has introduced mobile health units, which allow our patients closer-to-home access to VA audiology and podiatry services. These mobile units also provide rural health care, community enrollment outreach events, and are prepared for deployment under the emergency management program. We have also been working to provide extended hours that

accommodate our working Veterans. We have hired approximately 38 new staff to optimize Veteran access.

## **Mental Health**

Before reviewing our comprehensive mental health programs at Northport, I would first like to take a moment to address the August 21, 2016 death by suicide of a Veteran on medical center campus. The health and well-being of the courageous men and women who have served in uniform is the highest priority for VA and the Northport VAMC. We are committed to providing timely access to high quality, recovery-oriented mental health care that anticipates and responds to Veterans' needs and supports their reintegration into their communities.

Sadly, a Veteran took his life in a parking area at Northport VAMC on August 21, 2016. Review of campus videos, emergency department (ED) records, phone records, and the Veterans Crisis Line records reflect that the Veteran did not reach out for help prior to taking his life. It has been reported that two other Veterans committed suicide at Northport VAMC this year. While I must respect the families' privacy in the details of their loved ones' deaths, I can share that one of the individuals was a non-Veteran employee who died in the community. The other circumstance involved a Veteran where the Suffolk County Medical Examiner determined the death was not due to suicide.

The Northport VAMC has a long history of providing excellent clinical care in Mental Health, both at our main facility and our five community clinics. The leadership and clinicians are committed to providing quality care to Veterans, and have developed a comprehensive Behavioral Health Continuum of Care. Our goal and intent is to continue working as hard as we can to provide the care and services needed to hopefully eliminate Veteran suicides in our service area.

Access to mental health services can be obtained the same day for any person identifying an urgent need. Northport's mental health walk-in clinic has been in existence for over 25 years. It is available to Veterans without an appointment so they are able to see a dedicated psychiatrist when needed. An on-site psychiatrist is available in our Medical Center 24/7, should a patient present to the ED at any time requesting psychiatric help. This has been cited as a Best Practice by the Office of Mental Health Operations. Our intent is to continue providing this important aspect of care to our Veterans.

Our mental health specialty services include 42 acute care hospital beds, as well as substance abuse services, including outpatient detoxification, a day treatment program, a dual-diagnosis program, a psycho-social rehabilitation program, case management for Veterans, a mental health clinic, and residential programs for both substance abuse and posttraumatic stress disorder.

Our Substance Abuse Access Care Center provides walk-in availability for Veterans to see a substance abuse specialist, without an appointment. We also developed a unique written agreement with the Suffolk County Police. The goal of the arrangement is to ensure that any Veteran they engage who has a mental health crisis is brought directly to Northport, rather than a community hospital.

Northport recently received national recognition for the development of a Unified Behavioral Health Center for military or Veteran families. It was accomplished in cooperation with the Northwell Health system (formerly known as North Shore Long Island Jewish system). Through this synergy, Northport serves Veterans at our community clinic in Bayshore, while Northwell cares for the family members in a model of co-located collaborative care. The model acknowledges the stress that all family members experience as Veterans receive care, and evidences the value of family support to deal with the wounds of war.

Northport has embraced the national VA initiative to incorporate Mental Health into Primary Care. This has increased the opportunity for Veterans to identify personal challenges with pain, anxiety, sleep, depression, readjustment issues, life changes, and substance abuse during Primary Care visits -- without having to commit to visiting a psychiatrist -- as that may, from the Veteran's perspective, carry an undesired stigma.

Cognizant of the substance abuse challenges facing many Veterans and the prevalence of harmful drug use on Long Island, Northport clinicians have made a concerted effort to address substance abuse in the Veteran population through the national Opioid Safety Program. This initiative has reduced the number of patients on

high dose oral opioids by 47 percent from January 2015, through June 2016, while expanding complementary medicine alternatives such as acupuncture, meditation, and interventional pain management. We also are working to increase the use of newer, more sensitive urine toxicology methods. This will ideally further inform VA clinicians in each instance of care, ideally foster more honest conversations between clinicians and Veteran patients, and enable VA to provide proactive treatments including the opioid antagonists when appropriate. In this regard, we appreciate Congress' recent enactment of new authorities to support expanded access to opioid antagonists.

### **Infrastructure Issues**

Northport VA Medical Center is a tertiary care level 1 Joint Commission accredited facility serving Veterans in Nassau and Suffolk County, NY. The VA Medical Center is located in Northport, NY with outpatient clinics in: East Meadow, Patchogue, Riverhead, Bay Shore and Valley Stream, NY.

Northport VAMC's Building 200 cooling towers unfortunately failed on March 10, 2015. Immediate actions to help alleviate the situation included the rental of four portable chillers on March 12, 2015. The units provide cooling for the main hospital, outpatient clinics, and a portion of the Community Living Centers, and Administrative areas at an approximate net cost of \$50,000 per month.

Immediately after the failure, VA decided to pursue a Utility Energy Services Contract with a local utility company named National Grid for replacement of this critical infrastructure. Using this contract vehicle, VA would replace the failed equipment with

energy efficient components and could pay back the utility through energy and operational savings over a number of years. Contract performance began in August 2016, and is currently set for completion in Fall 2017.

On February 17, 2016, Northport VAMC's operating room (OR) staff detected sand-sized particles (later analyzed and identified as rust) coming from the heating, ventilation, and air condition (HVAC) system in OR 4. Facility leaders determined that the condition posed a potential risk to the health of patients and staff, and made the necessary decision to close all five ORs for Veteran safety.

Northport's attention then quickly turned to ensuring that Veterans would continue to receive proper and timely care in a safe environment. Patients who needed emergent surgical procedures were transferred to affiliate and local hospitals. Patients scheduled for elective procedures were offered care through other VISN 2 facilities in New York City, and in the community through the Veterans Choice Program. All decisions regarding surgeries were made with input and feedback from the patients and their physicians. Clinical reviews of those Veterans whose surgeries were relocated or postponed have not revealed any adverse effects or outcomes.

For three consecutive weeks after the initial OR closure, activities to remediate the problem included duct cleaning, continued surveillance for particles, installation of temporary filters, and consultative meetings with pertinent experts. Air and surface testing samples were taken in the ORs, to determine and confirm the efficacy of our



remediation efforts. Analysis of the samples through an independent environmental reference laboratory revealed insignificant levels of an airborne fungus cladosporium, which Infection Control experts concluded would not pose a health risk. Accordingly, three of the five ORs were reopened on March 14, 2016.

On April 13, 2016, particulates were observed again in one of the three open ORs. To ensure patient safety, VA leadership closed all three ORs for open surgical cases. Through consultation with subject matter experts within and outside of VA, Northport developed the following three-phase plan to resolve the issue so the ORs could then be reopened:

1. Fan-assisted high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters were chosen as the immediate action to control the particulate discharge. On June 1, 2016, VA received the fan-assisted HEPA filters, which were custom designed and created to fit into the ORs. Through the use of these filters, and upon confirming that the situation had sufficiently improved, the first 3 of the 5 ORs opened for patient care on June 7, 2016. All the ORs were open by June 16, 2016. Subsequent sampling and testing revealed no particulate discharge.
2. Following the reopening of Northport VAMC's ORs, an independent consultant conducted a forensic inspection of the OR air handler. It determined that the air handler could be refurbished to a safe condition. Based on VA's assessment, coupled with the observations and recommendations of this independent consultant, the Northport VAMC is pursuing a contract to refurbish the OR HVAC system. This is the intermediate plan for the OR.

3. The ultimate long-term plan is to evaluate the potential to ultimately replace the ORs by submitting a proposal through VA's Strategic Capital Investment Plan.

Lastly, we sincerely apologize for not alerting our Congressional partners sooner during this event. Please know that going forward our goal will be to ensure we provide more timely notice to you if and when similar events transpire. We truly appreciate the unwavering interest and support that you provide to our VA personnel and local Veterans.

### **Moving Forward**

The October 2015 integration of VISN 3 into VISN 2 has created new and improved synergies, transparency and alignments. Constructive interactions among the medical centers and contracting have increased dramatically in the past year and have created improved cooperation and efficiencies. This has included enhanced procurement package development, as well as contract awarding, implementation, and administration. This has helped us work to achieve our related goal to ensure quality and timely construction and maintenance of our facilities, respect for underlying budget constraints, and stewardship of our Nation's tax dollars.

During this process, leadership will continue to assess our current and future needs and project planning to better understand the underlying factors and develop enhanced planning processes to include risk assessment and cost based analyses.

This will enable us to develop improved long range capital investment plans based on lessons learned and consideration of best practices.

We are also committed to strengthening our incident command team so that we are better prepared should similar crises arise in the future. This team will include administrative and clinical leadership, as well as personnel in the areas of engineering, patient and environmental safety, infection control, contracting, and appropriate VA subject matter experts. We believe this is crucial to ensuring safety, access, quality, and financial stewardship. Northport VAMC is committed to the Secretary's MyVA Initiative of putting Veterans first and at the center of what we do. In that regard, we are excited and look forward to continuing our efforts to improving the Veteran experience, improving the employee experience so we can better serve Veterans, improving internal support services, establishing a culture of continuous improvement, and enhancing strategic partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

The leadership of VA, VISN 2, and the Northport VAMC are committed to ensuring excellent, high quality patient-centered care at all times and in all venues. We strive for prompt access, excellence in patient care, and superior clinical outcomes. Our clinical care teams value the importance of the Veteran experience. VA remains committed to ensuring America's Veterans have access to the health care they have earned through service. We are committed to accountability and transparency in providing any requested information to our Congressional stakeholders.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today. We appreciate your support of Veterans. We would be pleased to respond to any questions that you and Members of the Committee may have.