

HVAC Member Day Testimony

Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (WA-05)

Thank you, Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz, for holding this important Member Day to hear from Members across Congress about the work that we are doing for our veterans -- our nation's heroes. I'm grateful for your commitment to our veterans and your hard work in ensuring that they have the best access to quality and timely care. Although we've made much progress, there is still more work to be done.

Every day, I hear from veterans in Eastern Washington who are in desperate need of help from the VA. I am proud of the work that my office has done to help veterans, but there is still a long road ahead to ensure that every veteran is having the red carpet rolled out for them and receiving the care they have earned. I fear at times that the VA has become disconnected from their mission of serving veterans, and it's our job to make sure that their mission is at the center of everything they do.

Spokane VAMC

Last year, after several conversations with the VA Committee, staff came out to my district to conduct an investigation of what had been going on at the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center in my district. There were several issues brought to light, and I'm thankful that many of them have been addressed.

I had been made aware of a leak in a roof at Mann-Grandstaff. This hole in the roof was dripping water very close to the electrical grid which fuels electricity for the entire hospital. The staff at the VA were aware of this leak and that it had been going on for five years and as their way of fixing it had buckets and tubing to catch the water. After the VA Committee staff visit to my district, we were able to secure funding to fix this leak immediately. This not only could have compromised electricity for the entire hospital, but posed a danger to both staff and patients.

The Spokane VA used to have a 24 hour emergency room for veterans, but in 2014, they closed the ER because of the failure to hire doctors and physicians. 24 hour care for our veterans is critical to meeting their needs. I am pleased that after several meetings and communication between myself, the VA Committee, and leadership at the Spokane VA, they will be reopening as a 24 hour urgent care later this year.

In November of last year, I brought Chairman Roe out to my district to sit down with VA leadership and discuss some of these issues we're facing, as well as discuss Graduate Medical Education (GME) and collaboration with Washington State University's new Medical School to make the Mann-Grandstaff VAMC a teaching hospital. We have an amazing opportunity in Eastern Washington to teach medical students and provide care for veterans. Mann-Grandstaff has cited difficulty retaining physicians. By partnering with WSU and establishing residency slots, we can address that doctor shortage and provide stability.

H.R. 3497

The VA's sole mission is to serve our veterans. But unfortunately, instead of having the red carpet rolled out for them, veterans often are feeling like they are more of a burden when they contact the VA.

This includes veterans attempting to obtain something as simple as their medical records from the VA. I have even heard from providers in my community who have been frustrated to the point of tears because they are unable to treat veterans because the patient cannot obtain their own medical records. Some veterans have even waited more than two years to get their medical records from the VA. That is unacceptable.

Last year, I introduced a bipartisan bill along with Rep. Seth Moulton that would use off-the-shelf technology to fix this problem. My bill directs the VA Secretary to establish a secure, patient-centered, portable medical records system that would allow veterans to have access to their own medical records to bring with them to their doctor's appointments, whether it be at the VA or outside in the community.

The work that you as a Committee and that we as Congress are doing is important and will help our veterans. But there is still more to be done.

For example, the Walla Walla VA Medical Center in my district just received a one star rating citing facility leadership inefficiencies, being forced to travel long distances, and poor service provided to veterans. I know this isn't unique to my district, but an important one that must be addressed for our nation's heroes. I look forward to continue working with the House Veterans Affairs Committee to ensure our veterans in Walla Walla, and all veterans, are getting the care they've earned -- the care they've been promised.

Thank you.