

Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy
Before the
House Committee on Veterans Affairs
Bipartisan Member Day Hearing
Tuesday, September 10, 2019

Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and distinguished Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and discuss an issue that greatly impacts veterans in California's twenty-third congressional district, which I have the privilege of representing in Congress.

For far too long, thousands of veterans throughout Kern County have patiently waited for a new Community-Based Outpatient Clinic to be built in Bakersfield, California. The existing Bakersfield clinic is outdated and cramped—no longer able to fulfill the needs of Kern County's growing veteran population. Ten years ago, Congress authorized the construction of 15 new Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, including a clinic in Bakersfield, in Public Law 111-82. The Bakersfield clinic is the only location that remains unbuilt. This is unacceptable.

Veterans in my district had hope that the VA would break ground on the new clinic in 2015. However, that hope was derailed when the VA's chosen site was condemned by the High-Speed Rail Authority for being in the path of the costly high-speed rail project. This was among the first of several unnecessary delays and setbacks for the clinic.

Last October, I was thrilled to announce that the VA had finally awarded a contract for a brand-new, state-of-the-art 30,000 square foot Bakersfield clinic, located on Knudsen Drive. This clinic would provide veterans with expanded mental health and women's health care services. Unfortunately, this award became subject to several dilatory protests by the landlords of the current Bakersfield clinic facility. This has only further delayed—and continues to delay—our deserving veterans from accessing the expanded health care services that they have both earned and deserve.

Many of these multiple protests have been dismissed or settled—when is enough enough?

While I understand that the government contracting process must allow for fair competition, I do *not* understand how this process can be so manipulated and how the Bakersfield clinic remains unbuilt while other VA facilities authorized in 2009 are currently serving veterans.

By delaying construction of a new clinic, the current landlords are preventing veterans from receiving care and taking taxpayers for a ride. The VA is paying approximately \$172,000 per month to lease the Westwind Drive clinic on a month-to-month basis, according to data that the VA provided to my office. That's approximately twice what it paid under its longer-term lease.

Every day of delay is another day the taxpayer must pay the higher rent. Worse, the influx of cash is perpetuating delays because the landlords can pay for the legal costs of their protests. It is an effective strategy for the landlords, but a raw deal for everyone else, especially our veterans.

Yes, the federal contracting process must be transparent and responsive to reasonable concerns. However, it must also be trustworthy and not lose sight of its ultimate goal: helping our deserving veterans receive the quality service they need. In its quest for fairness, the contracting process has failed the very people it is meant to help.

The thousands of veterans in my community cannot be asked to wait any longer than they already have. Ten years is long enough. We must act quickly to ensure that the Bakersfield clinic is built to set a precedent that unreasonable dilatory tactics will not be tolerated.

Lastly, the difficulty in building a new clinic in Bakersfield suggests that the federal government's process for awarding contracts is liable to inefficiency and abuse.

I hope my testimony today has shined a light on one part of this larger problem and will inspire future action. I look forward to working with Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Roe, and all Committee Members to ensure that the Bakersfield clinic comes to fruition and that other veteran populations are not impacted by this broader systemic problem. Our goal must be a contracting process that is efficient, transparent, and accountable.

Above all else, it must not forget the needs of the American people, which it is meant to serve.

And that is the point I want to leave with you today. There is a human element, a human tragedy, to the failures of the current system. You can tell a lot about the character of a nation by how it treats its veterans. That is why I will not rest until this issue is resolved and a new clinic in Bakersfield built.

Our veterans deserve nothing less.

I would like to submit a letter from SASD Development Group for the record. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.