

Subject: Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
Date: September 9, 2019

For years, veterans in Monroe County have struggled with access to care. Former servicemembers living in the Florida Keys often have to travel over a hundred miles to the Miami VA to have access to the full set of care they need. This was supposed to have been addressed when the VA Choice Program was established in 2014, and access to care in rural areas was supposed to be improved in 2018 when Congress passed the VA MISSION Act. This replaced the VA Choice program with the Veterans Community Care Program, or the VCCP. Under the MISSION Act, any veteran living at least 40 miles away from a full-service VA is eligible to receive health care from community health providers that are in the approved Community Care network.

Although there is a VA clinic in Key West, they only provide basic care and often refer patients to the facility in Miami for most services. As such, many of our veterans have to travel for hours from their homes in the Keys to receive the care that they need. This program was supposed to be operational no later than June 6 of this year. Unfortunately, in Monroe County the providers in our network have yet to be approved, so although the MISSION Act went into effect this June, my constituents remain in limbo.

Furthermore, veterans in my district have been subject to the continuous disruption in service from the handoffs between the VA's private partners: Health Net, Tri West, and Optum. My constituents were originally covered through Health Net, and when they left Tri West temporarily took over, and now they're handing over to Optum. During these various handoffs, our veterans' health care needs have been forsaken. They have to travel long distances for care, often do not receive confirmation for appointments until the night before, and as a result can miss appointments when they are unable to secure transportation on such short notice.

My team recently heard from a constituent who had moved to the Keys and requires monthly treatments that can only be provided by a full-service VA. She had difficulty making an appointment with the Miami VA and wasn't informed of a confirmed appointment until the day before she was told to come in. Because of such a short notice time, she was unable to travel to Miami for her appointment. She was informed that she could go through the Community Care Network for her treatment more locally in the Keys, but because there have yet to be any approved providers, she had to go without the care she needed.

Unfortunately, this story is all too common. It has become such a challenge that Monroe County's Director of Veterans Affairs will often volunteer hours from

her day to drive veterans to Miami's VA multiple times a week so they can access necessary health services. This should not be necessary, and what's happening in Monroe County is unacceptable. Our veterans sacrificed when they answered the call to serve – government inefficiency shouldn't be the reason they forego medical attention after they've served.

Our veterans should have access to quality care, regardless of where they live. The men and women who served and defended our country should not have to forgo their care because they have nowhere to go to receive the treatment they need. I urge the committee to push the Office of Community Care at the VA to address this, and to have their private partners in Tri West and Optum Health to provide greater outreach to our local providers so they can provide care to our vets in Monroe County.

We also need more resources dedicated to our VA health clinics, so they have proper staffing to provide the full set of health care services at each facility. I urge the committee to hold the VA accountable for all aspects of the MISSION Act, from the Community Care program to building out our VA health centers. VA facilities around the country like the one we have in Monroe County should not have to struggle with understaffing issues so they can provide the full set of comprehensive health care services our veterans have earned and depend on.

I'm looking forward to working with the committee and my colleagues in Congress to address this issue so that our nation's veterans have access to the quality care they've earned and deserve.