

TESTIMONY OF HON. MARILYN STRICKLAND

May 26th, 2021

Dear Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today and for the important work you do to improve the lives of the men and women who have served our country. I also appreciate the hard work that the Biden Administration and Secretary McDonough have been doing to make process and service improvements at the Department of Veterans Affairs and know that we stand together in wanting the best possible care for our veterans. I am testifying today to draw attention to an important issue which has been raised repeatedly by veterans in my district: scheduling and appointment delays and communications breakdowns through the Veterans Health Administration's (VHA) Community Care program.

As you know, the Community Care program was passed into law as a part of the 2018 VA MISSION Act. The program is designed to help veterans get health services from community health care providers when they are unable to do so from the VA's own facilities. Congress created this program so that veterans are able to get the medical care they require in a timely, quality manner and, through partnerships with community health care providers, builds out the VA's capacity to get its patients the care they deserve.

Unfortunately, too many veterans who attempt to use this program have been frustrated by long wait times to schedule an appointment in the community. Data from the VA from October 2019 through June 2020 showed that veterans utilizing the Community Care program waited an average of nearly 42 days for their appointment. Furthermore, a report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the VA allows for up to 19 days internally simply for scheduling these appointments with the Community Care Network (CCN), and has no standard for ensuring a timely appointment once connecting with the CCN. This is unacceptable, particularly given that one of the primary criteria for access to the Community Care program in the first place is extended wait times within the VA's own system.

The language of the VA MISSION Act makes it clear that it is the Department's responsibility to ensure veterans get the care they need in a timely fashion, though it does not specify a specific time frame. I urge the Committee to take immediate action on this issue. In the 116th Congress Rep. Brownley, a member of this Committee, introduced the VA Community Care Wait Time Transparency Act, which would establish a goal by which to complete an appointment request, starting from the date of the inquiry and culminating in the appointment. It would also require the VA to be more transparent regarding average wait times to better enable veterans to make the best decisions possible regarding their health. I support this legislation, thank Rep. Brownley for her hard work in drafting it, and urge its introduction and passage in the 117th Congress.

My office has also received numerous comments from veterans frustrated by a lack of responsiveness from the VHA's Office of Community Care. From unanswered calls to unreturned voicemails to delayed responses to procedure pre-authorizations, it is clear that our veterans are not being provided the care they need and deserve. In one instance, a constituent with cancer was in the middle of ongoing oncology treatment with a Community Care provider and needed approval for the next round of chemotherapy. The Department took 5 months to provide an authorization for care. In another, a Community Care patient needing approval for continuing their course of pain-relieving acupuncture waited over 2 months for an approval, and when they reached out to a Patient Advocate for assistance, they did not receive a response. This is unacceptable. Whether the answer is additional Patient Advocates or higher standards for patient care, we must ensure that our veterans are able to get the help they need when they need it.

In order for the Community Care program to fulfill its goal of improving health standards for veterans who are unable to get timely care through the VA's own facilities, the issues I have outlined above must be addressed. I thank the Committee for considering my testimony and ask you to review policies which seek to address the issues plaguing Community Care.

Sincerely,

Marilyn Strickland
Member of Congress