

- Chairman Takano, Ranking Member Bost, and members of the committee. Thank you for allowing me to testify before your committee today. I recently introduced the Veterans Health Care Freedom Act and request that the committee support and advance the bill.
- Seven years ago, it was discovered that more than forty veterans had died while waiting for health care from the Carl T. Hayden Veterans' Administration Medical Center in Phoenix. Unfortunately, this problem was not just in Phoenix as veterans from across the nation began to reveal the horrendous conditions they faced at their local VAs. Our veterans were forced into a health care system that did not meet their physical or mental health needs. They faced long wait times and poor service.
- Upon hearing this, Congress decided to act. In 2018, President Trump signed the bipartisan VA Mission Act into law. This legislation was designed to expand access and to improve the quality of care for veterans. While we have seen marked improvement, problems still exist.
- According to the Atlanta Constitution, between September 2020 and early May 2021 more than 12,000 North Georgia veterans had to wait more than 30 days for a response from the Atlanta VA Health Care System. This is in addition to the 6,000 veterans who were still waiting for a response from the Atlanta VA Health Care System at the beginning of September.
- One veteran in Georgia had to wait over 3 months to get a pair of eyeglasses. He broke his glasses during the pandemic and tried to get them fixed by a local doctor. However, he was told he would have to drive to Augusta to get fitted, a 170-mile round trip. After all of that, he still had to wait 3 months to get his glasses in the mail.
- In Phoenix, a veteran who was seeking help spoke with several staff members of the Phoenix VA, yet he was unable to get help before he tragically took his own life.
- Earlier this year the entire Massachusetts congressional delegation wrote to VA Secretary Denis McDonough to protest "reports of veterans being asked to travel to Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island for appointments, including a veteran with Multiple Sclerosis who had to drive 210 miles round trip in a blizzard to an appointment in Connecticut."
- Between March 15, 2020, and May 1, 2020, the VA Office of Inspector General determined that 7.3 million appointments had been canceled and as of September 1, 2020, 2.3 million of those had no indication of follow-up or tracking.
- These are just a few examples of the challenges our veterans face in gaining access to the high-quality care they so desperately need and deserve. Unfortunately, even when our veterans are able to get appointments at their local VA, they receive subpar care.

- The Memphis, Tennessee medical center ranks at the bottom of 23 area facilities. In St. Louis, the VA ranks next to last among the 55 options in that region. Phoenix Arizona Medical Center ranked 30 out of 40 and Washington D.C. Medical Center ranked 17 out of 20. While there are some outstanding VA medical centers, most centers have similar rankings to the ones I just mentioned.
- In 2014, Congress passed the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act (VACAA). This legislation created the Commission on Care to examine veterans' access to health care and to make recommendations on how to improve the VA. In 2016, this commission presented its report to the Obama – Biden Administration and made several recommendations, including allowing veterans to have greater access to community care.
- The Veterans Health Care Freedom Act would create a three-year pilot program that would improve veterans ability to access health care in the free market.
- Currently, veterans must receive approval from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) before they can receive community care. My legislation would only require veterans to receive approval from their primary care doctor.
- Veterans would be able to access primary, specialty, and mental health care outside of their corresponding Veteran Integrated Service Network and at non-VA facilities.
- Veterans would be free to choose any primary care doctor in the covered care system or have a specialist designated as their primary care doctor.
- Veterans needing mental health services would be able to choose their own mental health care provider.
- By eliminating bureaucratic red tape and allowing veterans to go straight to their doctor for care, we can ensure that no veteran dies waiting for care.
- This legislation is the best way to ensure that veterans are able to gain access to quality health care in a timely manner.
- The brave men and women of our armed forces have answered our nation's call and put their lives on the line to defend us from those who seek to take our freedoms. From Normandy to Vietnam to the Middle East they have exemplified the best of America. They have fought for us, now it is time for us to fight for them and ensure that they have access to the care that they deserve.
- Thank you for allowing me to testify today. I hope this committee will begin consideration of this legislation immediately.