

The Honorable Derek Kilmer
House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Member Day
May 26, 2021
Testimony for the Record

Testimony:

Chairman Takano, I want to thank you and Ranking Member Bost for holding this Member Day. I represent Washington 6th congressional district – and have the honor and privilege of representing perhaps more veterans than any Democrat in Congress. When it comes to serving our veterans, I think the federal government should follow a few basic truths: if you served our country, the government ought to have your back. You shouldn't have to fight for the benefits you've earned and deserve.

There's so much work to do to make sure the government keeps its promises to veterans. And I'm grateful for your work in that regard Mr. Chairman – and I appreciate the opportunity to share some of my concerns and concerns from the brave veterans I represent.

One of the core tenants of taking care of our veterans is ensuring that they have access to quality, affordable health care, in a timely manner. Since the rollout of the VA MISSION Act, veterans face significant challenges in accessing medical care in Region 4 which covers the Puget Sound area. I am hoping this committee can help resolve these issues and improve access to care provided by the VA.

VA health care is provided to over 81,000 veterans in my region through the Puget Sound Health Care System of VA facilities and through a community care network (CCN) of community providers. In our region, the CCN is administered through TriWest. As you are aware, Congress passed the VA MISSION Act in 2018 to provide veterans timely access to quality care and to make the community care network work better for veterans. The act included a variety of improvements to VA operations and IT systems.

Unfortunately, since the MISSION Act was implemented in June 2019, I've received numerous complaints from constituents voicing their frustrations with the rollout. I've heard from veterans and providers who report difficulties in accessing care for several reasons including: a lack of clear communication, long wait times to receive care, delays in approving claims, and an understaffed Patient Advocate Program.

I am concerned that the VA and TriWest did not clearly communicate process changes. Many veterans were not informed of the new procedures to request continuing care through their existing community providers, leaving them without access to quality care. Moving forward, the VA must improve communications with veterans to ensure they can make informed decisions about their care.

I am also alarmed by a lack of communication to providers. I've received feedback that TriWest did not notify providers if they were selected to remain in the network. Many providers indicate they did not receive instructions on how to complete the recredentialing process. The VA and TriWest must improve communications to community providers to ensure they understand process changes and recredentialing procedures.

In addition to these communication issues, veterans are experiencing long wait times for appointments at VA facilities and in the community. Phone calls go unanswered, appointments are delayed, and wait-time standards are not being met. This is unacceptable. If the VA is unable to provide an appointment at a VA facility within wait-time standards – 20 days for primary care and 28 days for specialty care - then the veteran is eligible to receive care through the CCN. An alarming 2020 GAO report highlights a potential **19-day** wait period while the appointment request proceeds through the VA's referral and scheduling process. After the referral is forwarded to a CCN provider, there is **no** standard wait-time for the appointment to be scheduled. Internal VA data from October 2019 through June 2020 showed veterans waited **an average of 41.9 days** for an appointment in the community. The VA must establish an achievable wait-time goal for CCN appointments.

I am also troubled with delays providers are experiencing in having claims adjudicated. The MISSION Act included provisions to modernize the legacy IT systems and manual processes. I've received feedback that the software tool used for claim adjudication is not fully functional, yet legacy faxes go unanswered. I urge the VA to exercise oversight of software tools to ensure the software is functional for seamless claims adjudication.

Finally, I am disturbed by the understaffed Patient Advocate office in our region. This office plays an important role in assisting veterans struggling to navigate the system. Currently, the Puget Sound website lists only three Patient Advocates assigned to the over 112,000 veterans accessing health care in our region. I urge the VA to hire additional Patient Advocates for Region 4.

Ultimately, these issues are not just impacting veterans in my district, but veterans across the country. Therefore, I ask that the committee works with me on these issues so that our veterans can access the care they have earned.

Chairman Takano and Ranking Member Bost – thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I am proud to stick up for our veterans - men and women who have always responded with courage and loyalty in service to our country. I am grateful for their tremendous dedication and sacrifice. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.