

118th Congress Member Day Hearing

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

June 22, 2023

Testimony for Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez

Thank you, Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, for the opportunity to testify today.

Following recent meetings with veterans in Lewis County, I am deeply concerned about a number of issues impacting constituent veterans who receive care through the VA Puget Sound Health Care System. We have an obligation to ensure veterans receive the health care they need, and it has become apparent to me that the VA Puget Sound Health Care System is not keeping up their end of the bargain.

Clinic Closure

First and foremost, veterans in Lewis County have seen their access to care reduced dramatically in recent years.

The 2021 closure of the Chehalis Community-Based Outpatient Clinic cut many veterans off from nearby care. In the most rural parts of East Lewis County, travel times to the nearest VA facility went from around an hour to more than two hours to get to a VA Puget Sound facility.

After the VA cut decided to close this clinic, they offered a Mobile Medical Unit, the so-called MMU. We were given the impression that this MMU would provide walk-in appointments, keep vets connected to their doctors, and ensure availability throughout the week.

That's not the deal we got. We got a MMU that spends one day per week in Chehalis. It is available on **Wednesdays from 8am to 4pm**. Eight appointments are available each day, and the only services offered are primary care and laboratory work.

The VA Puget Sound Health Care System did not follow through on any of their stated priorities when standing up the MMU, and veterans are worse off as a result.

In a rural community with sparse specialty and mental health care options to begin with, the closure of a full CBOC and replacement with a MMU has put lifesaving care out of reach for many veterans.

Phone Delays:

To make matters worse, veterans who need services are stuck waiting on hold for hours to reach the VA Puget Sound.

In Lewis County, veterans have reported to me that they regularly wait on hold for more than two hours for basic scheduling needs or to speak to a nurse. Oftentimes, around the two-hour mark, the line cuts out and they must start the call and hold process all over again. Some veterans reported spending upwards of **six hours** on hold.

These wait times are unacceptable. The rest of my district is served by the VA Portland Health Care System. Notably, I have not heard similar complaints from constituent veterans served by them.

Issues with Community Care

Given reduced access to care, veterans should be able to rely on Community Care providers as well. While veterans seem to be satisfied with the services provided through Community Care, the same cannot be said of the VA's handling of these appointments.

In one case, a veteran in my district was referred to Community Care, and after waiting on hold for an hour and a half, they were finally able to get through to the VA Puget Sound's Community Care Department. The department scheduled an appointment for them and notified him of this appointment by mail. This notice was mailed out **eight days** after their appointment had already passed.

Access to Staff

My job as a member of Congress is to oversee federal agencies. I have had difficulty receiving timely or adequate responses to the questions my staff and I have posed to the VA Puget Sound Health Care System staff.

I expect an open line of communication to discuss the aforementioned issues, among other problems facing veterans in Lewis County.

Again, my staff and I do not have these issues with the VA Portland Health Care System. The problem seems to be limited to the Puget Sound facility, and this deserves congressional oversight.

Conclusion

In return for their service to our country, we have made a promise to our veterans that we must uphold. It is our responsibility to ensure they have the access to health care necessary to lead a full and healthy life after their time in the armed services has ended.

Taken in sum, I am concerned that the VA Puget Sound Health Care System is not upholding this promise and serving veterans in Lewis County well.

Thank you.