

**U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

**Oversight Hearing
“Restoring Focus: Putting Veterans First in Community Care”**

**Statement for the Record
Paul McKenna**

January 22, 2025

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs – thank you for inviting me to submit this written statement for the record of today's hearing on veterans' experiences using the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Community Care Network. I am here today as a voice for countless Veterans in Eastern North Carolina who continue to struggle to effectively and efficiently utilize this critical part of VA's health care system.

As the committee is aware, the VA MISSION Act became law in 2018 and was intended to improve access to health care for Veterans. My aim today is to illustrate the gaps and seams within several pillars of this legislation that are present in Eastern North Carolina, with specific attention on access to care, the Community Care Network, and the education and training of the VA workforce that coordinates access to care in the community. My hope is that my statement will offer the committee some insight to the real challenges that Veterans face with when using the Community Care Network in Eastern North Carolina. Additionally, and what may sound anecdotal, is to share with you my experience with using the services of VA's Community Care Network in two different geographical locations and the experiences of many Veterans I have talked to who must utilize community-based services.

My name is Paul McKenna. I retired in 2021 after 36 years of active-duty service in the United States Marine Corps. I have held numerous Military Occupational Specialties (MOSs) throughout my career, with the last 20 years being spent primarily with the infantry and combat arms MOSs. I have 9 combat deployments in support of Operation Restore Hope (Somalia), Operation Iraqi Freedom (Iraq), Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) and Operation Enduring Freedom, Joint Task Force, Special Operations Force, (Southern Philippines). I have learned many life lessons from my nearly four decades of service as a US Marine, and at the top of that list is that no American can afford to be disinterested in any part of his government, whether it is county, city, state, or nation. One of the great lessons the Marine Corps taught me was to never take for granted of being the presence of other Marines and their greatness. For 36 years I walked amongst giants, I will forever cherish those relationships, especially the relationships of the American Heroes that never came home. I truly hope that my actions and words today bring honor to their memory and sacrifice.

My wife and I initially resided in Northwest Florida after my retirement, and I was able to receive timely and adequate medical care from the VA in that region. There were several factors that drove us to this part of the country; one, my wife, Michela, who is a federal employee, took a new position within government service at Naval Air Station Whiting Field in Milton, Florida. Two, the quality of cardiac care within the area of Northwest Florida. Michela received a mechanical heart valve after being diagnosed and treated for endocarditis in 2013. And three, the word from fellow retired Marines that the VA health care system was first rate. Michela's medical care is covered by TRICARE for Life, and that insurance involves expensive copays for her continued care.

The primary reason for choosing the VA for my medical needs was for our financial wellness and the fact that I earned it. I am 100% permanent and total disabled and I use the VA as my primary medical provider. The VA in Northwest Florida (Pensacola) is a VA Clinic associated with the Biloxi VA Medical Center in Mississippi, which was two hours from our home in Milton, Florida. The care at the VA Pensacola Clinic was first rate and Dr. Sandoval and his team always treated me with the highest degree of professionalism, dignity, and compassion. Because I require a specialist in some areas of health care, and the fact that the Pensacola VA clinic does not have that capability or capacity, I was referred to the Community Care Network, i.e., Mental Health (PTSD), Neurology (TBI), Orthopedics, Podiatry, and Dermatology. The process in Pensacola was seamless. Starting with seeing Dr. Sandoval and his Team to scheduling with the Community Care Network counselors to be seen out in the community. The entire process took no longer than 10 to 15 days.

In June of 2022, I relocated to Richlands, North Carolina and registered with the VA clinic in Jacksonville, North Carolina. Just like Pensacola the Main VA Hospital for this region is in Fayetteville, North Carolina, two and half hours away from my residence in Richlands. After registration at the Jacksonville VA clinic, I was informed that I would have to contact the Community Care Network and seek a provider out in the community. This was due to the lack of capacity of doctors and nurses at the clinic and that they were not taking any new patients. Community Care set me up with MEDFIRST in Richlands, North Carolina.

MEDFIRST is a primary and urgent care clinic that only has nurse practitioners on staff. The MEDFIRST nurse practitioners can draw blood and perform only basic medical care. This clinic (MEDFIRST) does not have the expertise or capacity to treat my medical issues which include mental health, traumatic brain injury (TBI), post-traumatic stress disorder, neurology, orthopedics, podiatry, dermatology, and urology. MEDFIRST must put a referral in the VA system for me to be seen out in the community for medical treatment. That referral goes through a third-party vendor who then submits the referral request to the VA. When I call the VA Community Care line or contact the VA through MyHealthVet to understand why the process is taking so long, all I hear is "That's just the way it is" or "your primary care provider did not submit the correct form." As to the latter statement, I personally watched my primary care provider at MEDFIRST fax the request and the next day when I called to follow up was still told that the VA did not

receive it and when I stated that I have the fax receipt, I was told “sorry don’t know what to tell ya.”

More generally, the third-party vendor appears to have little to no oversight from either the VA or MEDFIRST. I have been waiting for over nine months for some of these referrals to be processed. I draw this conclusion as I attempted to gain their contact information, phone or email and was informed by MEDFIRST and the VA that they are not authorized to provide the contact information of this third party-vendor to the Veteran. My experience is not unique. I have heard the same concerns and complaints from countless Veterans here in Eastern North Carolina. Since moving to Richlands, NC, I continue to experience delays in care from the VA Care in the Community Network.

Despite my best efforts to advocate for my care, I never receive a clear answer from the VA counselors who answer the phones. When I quiz the VA counselors on the fundamentals of the VA MISSION Act, they are clueless of this legislation. I have contacted my VA patient advocate (Sheldon Edwards) numerous times and left voicemails and have yet to hear back from him or his office. No human being, let alone a Veteran should have to wait six to nine months to receive treatment for any medical issue, especially when the injuries occurred while in service to their country.

I am asking this committee to investigate why there is no capacity to properly treat our Veterans in Eastern North Carolina in a timely and adequate manner and direct the VA to properly educate and train their workforce within the Community Care Network on the VA MISSION Act in Eastern North Carolina.

Thank you again for the opportunity to participate in today’s hearing on the VA Community Care Network. It is my hope that Congress and the VA can take some of those things that were working in Northwest Florida like the referral process and the access to care and help replicate those qualities for Veterans across the country so that they can get the care they need in a timely manner no matter where they choose to live after service. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.