

House Committee on Veterans' Affairs
"119th Congress Member Day"

Written Testimony by Representative Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (WA-03)

Thank you, Chairman Bost and Ranking Member Takano, for the opportunity to testify today. Below are just a few of the issues I hear about from veterans in my district that I'd like to bring to your attention.

Rural Veterans Care in Lewis County

Since assuming office in 2023, I have heard time and time again from veterans and their loved ones in Lewis County, Washington about a range of issues they have faced to receive care through the VA Puget Sound Health Care System. Most notably, in 2021, the Chehalis Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) closed, cutting off many veterans from accessing nearby care. Following the closure of the clinic, the veteran community in the area began a nearly two-year petition drive – gathering tens of thousands of signatures to underscore the need for this clinic. Last year, I delivered these signatures to former Secretary McDonough, and earlier this year I delivered these signatures to Secretary Collins, reiterating my request for a clinic to be reopened in the location it is most acutely needed – Lewis County, Washington. I was incredibly disappointed to receive a response from Secretary Collins that there is no plan to reopen the Chehalis clinic.

The veterans who previously received care from this clinic have been told that they will need to travel to Olympia to get care, in many instances doubling their drive time. In an attempt to mitigate access-to-care problems for Lewis County veterans, the VA offered a Mobile Medical Unit (MMU) in Chehalis, Washington, that operates only on Wednesdays with only eight appointments available. Even still, this leaves hundreds of veterans unserved and outside of the VA's own drive time standard who must now resort to the Community Care Network. Rural communities, like the ones I represent in Lewis County, already struggle to attract and retain health care providers. Despite the VA's assertion that there is adequate provider availability through Community Care in the area, I still hear from my constituents about egregious wait times to schedule appointments or only being able to schedule appointments months out. In fact, some Veterans Service Organization (VSO) representatives advise veterans that they need to be more vigilant and persistent when seeking Community Care—telling them it's up to them to call each day to follow up and ensure they can get the appointments and care they need.

By closing the CBOC and replacing it with an inadequate MMU, the VA Puget Sound Health Care System has put lifesaving care out of reach of many veterans.

Rural Transportation to Care

Given the current situation, I am focused on making sure veterans in the rural areas in my district are able to get to their appointments. That's why I introduced the *Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act*, which would modernize the VA's Highly Rural Transportation Grant Program. The program is currently limited in statute to counties with fewer than seven people per square mile. With updated 2020 Census data, there are only eligible counties in 13 states, including only one county in Washington state. One of the counties in my district no longer receives these critical funds because their population now sits at 7.15 people per square mile. Many very rural counties, like those in my district, are just missing out on this program because of outdated restrictions with arbitrary thresholds on the eligibility of the areas that the program serves.

My bipartisan bill would improve how the VA measures rurality, expand eligibility to both rural and highly rural counties, include tribal organizations as eligible entities, and increase the maximum award amount to keep up with rising prices. This would help more veterans living in rural areas get transportation to VA or VA-authorized health care facilities. I appreciate that the committee held a legislative hearing considering this legislation last Congress, and I urge continued support for these updates.

Medical Companion Programs

I have also heard from veterans in my district that there is a major barrier to care for veterans who do not have an adult who can take them to or home from surgery involving anesthesia. These surgeries end up getting cancelled or postponed, which risks worse outcomes for our veterans.

I have been heartened to hear about some VA medical facilities organizing programs to provide caregiver services to veterans who don't have anyone to accompany them. These Medical Companion Programs facilitate time-limited, VA-paid, medical companion services in which the companion accompanies a veteran through their surgery process. I strongly support more medical companion programs to ensure these veterans can make it to and from the life changing surgeries they need, and was glad to successfully include report language in the FY26 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Report supporting these programs, and look forward to working with you to consider how we may be able to best strengthen these programs.

Community Building Opportunities

One of the best things we can do for suicide prevention for our veterans is make access to health care easier, so that our veterans can be healthy and engaged members of their communities. Another is investing in community programs where our veterans can harness the skills they learned during their service and re-engage with their communities in a way that is meaningful and fulfilling to the reasons they joined our armed services in the first place—to protect and serve our nation.

During roundtables with veterans across my district, I have been impressed with the ideas our veterans have in how we can better serve them. One idea that was particularly interesting to me involved creating opportunities for community building through auto shop programs to fix their own cars like they could on base when they were serving, and to hone old skills and build new ones that can feed back into their communities.

Once again, thank you to the Chairman and Ranking Member for the opportunity to shine a light on the unique challenges facing veterans in Southwest Washington. I look forward to working together to deliver better for our veterans and communities.