

**STATEMENT OF  
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH**

**March 12, 2018**

Good afternoon Chairman Wenstrup, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee. I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) VA Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS) and the provision of health care in Puerto Rico. I am accompanied today by Dr. Antonio Sanchez, Acting Director of the VA Caribbean Healthcare System.

**Introduction**

VACHS is a Joint Commission accredited, level 1a system of care serving Veterans in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. VACHS consists of a tertiary care VA medical center (VAMC) located in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and 10 outpatient clinics (OPC) located throughout Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The San Juan VAMC includes multi-disciplinary ambulatory facilities and 280 operational acute care beds, including 12 blind rehabilitation beds and 122 operational nursing home beds. Services are provided to a population of approximately 93,000 Veterans residing in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In fiscal year (FY) 2017, VACHS saw 62,974 unique patients and recorded 1,047,566 outpatient visits and 9,719 hospital admissions. VACHS strives to be the benchmark of excellence and value in health care and benefits by providing exemplary services that are both patient-centered and evidence-based. This care is delivered by engaged, collaborative teams in an integrated environment that supports learning, discovery and continuous improvement. It emphasizes

prevention and population health and contributes to the Nation's well-being through education, research, and service in national emergencies.

### **VA's Fourth Mission**

VA's "Fourth Mission" is to improve the Nation's preparedness for response to war, terrorism, national emergencies, and natural disasters by developing plans and taking actions to ensure continued service to Veterans, as well as to support national, state, and local emergency management, public health, safety, and homeland security efforts. VA's Comprehensive Emergency Management Program ensures that VA's mitigation, preparedness, and response and recovery activities focus on continuity of Veterans' care in the event of emergencies and disasters. Further, the VA Office of Emergency Management provides a full range of support across these four phases of emergency response to ensure resiliency, continuity, and rapid recovery of VA health care services during disasters and other emergencies that affect health care service delivery. VAMCs, Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Offices, and National Cemeteries have robust comprehensive emergency management programs and emergency preparedness plans to maintain operations during times of disaster or emergencies or to evacuate if needed. VACHS's ability to maintain critical operations throughout the historical hurricane season of 2017 is a testament to VA's commitment of significant resources and planning to these efforts.

### **2017 Hurricane Season Immediate Actions**

The 2017 hurricane season was one of the costliest seasons on record; Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 8 facilities, which include those in the Caribbean and Florida, were directly impacted by not one, but two major hurricanes. Hurricane Irma barreled through the Caribbean on September 8, 2017, devastating St. Thomas and leaving nearly 1 million people without power on the island of Puerto Rico.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, VACHS, as a key partner in the national response to disasters, mobilized emergency response units to the Luis Muñoz Marín International Airport to receive patients from the U.S. Virgin Islands through the activation of the Federal Coordinating Center (FCC). The mission of an FCC is to

receive, triage, stage, track, and transport inpatients affected by a disaster or national emergency to a participating National Disaster Medical System inpatient hospital capable of providing the required definitive care.

Through the collaborative efforts of Federal, state, and local governments and non-government organizations, the unified emergency response teams received 92 patients from St. Thomas and St. Croix. All patients were assessed upon arrival at the airport and then transported to multiple hospitals in the metropolitan area including the San Juan VAMC. A newborn baby, a pregnant woman, an elderly patient, and Veterans were among the people assisted during this mission. Of note, 40 non-Veteran patients received hemodialysis at VACHS, which proved to be vital, life-sustaining treatment.

On September 20, 2017, while still recovering from Hurricane Irma's impacts, a category five Hurricane—Maria—hit Puerto Rico with forces beyond those imaginable, affecting in particular the mountainous areas in the interior of the Island. Tremendous impacts to critical infrastructure were widespread; nearly the entire island was without power, water, and telephone service and conditions of roads and buildings were perilous.

Because of VA's investment in emergency preparedness and response resources, VACHS was able to maintain critical hospital operations throughout the storm and was able to bring community-based clinics back into operation within weeks. Additionally, VACHS was in a position to offer assistance to other health care systems more severely impacted by the hurricane. Some examples include:

- A 72-year old Vietnam Veteran with a spinal cord injury was stranded on the Island of Vieques after the hurricane. The Veteran's medical condition required continuous medication; he was unable to receive that care because the community-based outpatient clinic was too badly damaged. Through the assistance of FEMA and combined efforts of VA and the Department of Defense (DoD), the Veteran was airlifted to the San Juan VA where he received lifesaving health care.

- VACHS was able to reach 100 percent of the over 3,000 Veterans identified as being members of a vulnerable population, which included Veterans experiencing homelessness, those requiring hemodialysis, those dependent on ventilators, those at high risk for suicide, and those with severe mental health illnesses. Assisted by FEMA, VA staff utilized ground, air and sea transportation methods to meet with each Veteran to confirm his or her well-being.
- Under a Mission Assignment from FEMA to NORTHCOM, A 70-bed Federal Medical Station (FMS) was operated out of a local sports arena in Manati, Puerto Rico, with the mission of providing medical care to the entire community, not just Veterans. In addition to the provision of medical care, FMS also served as a medical shelter for individuals who needed support that did not meet hospitalization requirements. This hybrid medical station-shelter was operated by more than 70 VA medical personnel deployed under the Disaster Emergency Personnel System, as well as personnel from the Department of Health and Human Services. VACHS provided wrap around services such as food, logistics, equipment, and staff to support to the daily operation of FMS.

These efforts did not come without certain limitations and challenges. Immediately following the storm, VA outpatient clinics relied on generator power and limited communication capabilities, including data resources. Additionally, the Arecibo clinic suffered significant damage leaving it unusable for patient care. VA dispatched mobile medical units and ultimately a Western Shelter System to ensure Veterans in this community continued to receive needed health care services. The Vieques clinic, which is co-located with other government offices, has yet to reopen; however, VA staff made home visits to patients on the Island until a mobile medical unit could be put in place. With these two exceptions, VA outpatient clinics are fully operational. Roughly 23,000 appointments were cancelled as a direct result of the hurricane. VACHS staff

reached out to all Veterans whose appointments were cancelled; more than 21,000 appointments were rescheduled with the remainder not indicating the need for an appointment.

FEMA issued a mission assignment (approximately \$2m) to the Veterans Affairs for support to the Puerto Rico response. FEMA coordinated with the VA to provide transportation to personnel and supplies in a time-phased approach. This transportation was provided in alignment with operational objectives and available assets.

### **Planning for the Future**

Prior to the 2017 hurricane season, VACHS recognized the changing Veteran demographics and needs of those who entrusted us with their health care. Access to care is a top priority of the system, and as such, we have focused resources on providing same day access at all facilities. As of February 2018, 93.7 percent of time sensitive appointments were complete before the patient indicated date.

VACHS provides care for 6,739 Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) Veterans. During FY 2017 the system participated in more than 20 outreach events connecting active duty Servicemembers and Veterans throughout Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The OEF/OIF/OND Transition Program facilitates the transition of care from DoD and coordination of services, while providing case management to those referred by Military Treatment Facilities (MTF) or those individuals otherwise seeking care from VA. Also, VACHS has an established and engaged Community Veteran Engagement Board working collaboratively to ensure that all Veterans in Puerto Rico are aware of the services available at VA. In November 2017, staff from the San Juan VAMC began participating in a weekly, 1-hour public service program dedicated to Veterans. This collaboration was made possible thanks to the Puerto Rico Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army, and it unites public affairs staff from VA and DoD to bring information about services, benefits, and programs available to Veterans in Puerto Rico.

VACHS is currently focused on preparing for the 2018 hurricane season, which begins at the end of May. Efforts underway to prepare in advance include: deployment of comprehensive awareness and education campaigns; outreach to vulnerable and high-risk Veteran populations; building on established relationships with community entities; updating lease agreements to ensure a timely response after a natural disaster; and exploring more reliable voice and data communication strategies. Most importantly, there are \$27 million worth of high-risk infrastructure improvements that must be completed before the beginning on the upcoming hurricane season.

Finally, VACHS is continually working to improve the space used for the care of our Veterans. These projects include a new canopy for the drop-off area and pedestrian walkway at the San Juan VAMC, the expansion of the emergency room and observation unit at the San Juan VAMC, seismic corrections at the San Juan VAMC, and replacement facilities for the Ponce Euripides Rubio Outpatient Clinic and the Arecibo Community-Based Outpatient Clinic.

### **Other Support**

VACHS remains committed to honoring America's Veterans by providing exceptional health care and pursues this objective in close collaboration with our Federal agency partners, leading national organizations, local government agencies, and with Veterans Service Organizations and other nonprofit entities. VACHS currently has a sharing agreement in place with the DoD's U.S. Army Garrison at Fort Buchanan to provide health care services to Reserve members when they are on active duty during weekend exercises. In addition, there is a Memorandum of Agreement in place with the U.S. Army's 1st Mission Support Command that allows Reserve members of the mortuary affairs unit to receive training at the San Juan VAMC. There is also an agreement with the DoD's Rodriguez Army MTF for phlebotomy services that are utilized by Veterans on a daily basis. Finally, VACHS refers any Veteran in need of emergency specialized trauma services to the Puerto Rico Health Department Trauma center, which is the island's only trauma center.

VACHS welcomes the opportunity to expand current efforts with Federal and local entities, as well as establish new agreements that will benefit Veterans throughout Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The health care system remains committed to open dialog regarding joint efforts and enthusiastically encourages their development.

## **Conclusion**

While VACHS excelled during times of crisis, there is still action required to ensure the needs of Veterans in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are consistently met. Sustaining the momentum and preserving the gains made so far requires continued attention and investment of financial resources. Failure to provide such resources will severely jeopardize our ability to sustain our progress and will put at risk thousands of Veterans and their families in the future. It is critical that we continue to move forward after the hurricanes and continually improve the system of care that is provided by the VA Caribbean Healthcare System.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. My colleague and I are prepared to answer any questions.