

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

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Good morning, Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Dunn and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Veterans' access to community care since the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) implemented the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act of 2018. I am joined by Dr. Mark Upton, Acting Assistant Under Secretary for Health for Community Care, and Dr. Jennifer MacDonald, Chief Consultant to the Deputy Under Secretary for Health.

Introduction

This is an unprecedented and transformational time in U.S. health care, and VA is proud to be leading the way forward on behalf of those we serve. While the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic continues to cause uncertainty around the globe, one truth is clear: we can and will overcome the challenges before us. From the front line to senior leadership, VA is committed to leading the way into the future – in the direct and community care aspects of our system as we are discussing today, and in everything we do. We are honored to serve as the backstop to the Nation's health care system, and we are unified in our mission to deliver excellence for the more than 9 million Veterans who entrust us with their care. Through our 4th mission, we have also carried this excellence beyond our organizational boundaries, delivering support in 47 States, the District of Columbia, and Tribal communities, where Veterans and their families live and thrive.

Prior to the pandemic, VHA was in the midst of a tremendous transformation: unifying the direct and community care aspects of the enterprise; empowering Veterans with more excellent choices; and modernizing our processes and systems to enable an optimal experience of care and services. With the onset of COVID-19, we acted swiftly and decisively to ensure the safety of those in our care, while still maintaining the same focus on experience. VA set the example for U.S. health care in our steps to protect our Community Living Centers by staying open for all care where clinical urgency rose above the risk of COVID-19 and reinventing our methods of providing routine elective care. We expanded telehealth by more than 1,000% to care for Veterans safely, often within their own homes. In these times, when distance and isolation can affect many of us, our dedicated staff have gone above and beyond to keep Veterans connected with

their families and engaged with their care teams. Even now, our front line is reviewing each and every referral for care made since the start of the pandemic.

Advancing a Best-In-Class Experience

As we look to the future and continue to innovate and enhance our care delivery models, we are focused on the moments in the care journey that matter most to Veterans and their families and caregivers. Knowing that the timeliness of scheduling and care delivery are among those key moments, we are intently focused on bringing the agility we have demonstrated in so many other aspects of the enterprise to this area, achieving a best-in-class experience.

The Referral Coordination Initiative, launched in January 2020, to ensure timely and consistent referral management with an enhanced experience for Veterans across direct and community care, is reaffirmed as a core element of our ongoing modernization. When Veterans leave an in-person or virtual visit, or come to VA for the first time, we want them to have the certainty of understanding their next step in care. We want them to be empowered with the best options through their Referral Coordination Team and know that we will deliver on those options with expediency.

While COVID-19 unavoidably shifted our Referral Coordination Initiative implementation timeline in recent months, we are leaning forward again to accelerate this work. VA is as prepared as any health care system can be for the exigencies of the pandemic that may occur this Fall, and we intend to continue to drive the Referral Coordination Initiative forward with focus and precision – making this a welcome change for our dedicated and incredibly resilient frontline.

Community Care

Regarding community care, our modernization achievements this past year have positioned us to intensify focus on referral coordination and timeliness. The success of our urgent care network has given Veterans an important option for accessing care locally during the pandemic, including for COVID-19 testing, and VA has now successfully transitioned from TriWest to Optum for urgent care in Regions 1, 2 and 3, and the network in Region 4 will transition to Community Care Network under TriWest at the end of this month. As of September 2020, more than 8,100 urgent care centers have joined VA's urgent care network, and Veterans have received care through an estimated 400,000+ visits. In June, VA also established a Credentialing Verification Organization that enables verification of community provider qualifications and competence for Veterans Care Agreements. We are offering training to community providers on key aspects of care that matter to Veterans, including military culture, suicide prevention, military sexual trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Importantly, as community providers face the operational and financial strain of the pandemic, VA's partners for the Community Care Network contract, the primary vehicle for purchasing community care, are processing the vast majority of clean claims in under 30 days.

To enhance referral processing efficiency and coordination, VA has implemented a web-based referral and authorization tool called HealthShare Referral Manager (HSRM), which enables rapid, secure and bidirectional sharing of health care authorization and medical information with community providers. HSRM is used to validate authorizations and match episodes of care with community provider visits, allowing faster and more accurate auto-adjudication and payment. This means VA is a stronger partner to those in our network caring for Veterans.

We intend to continue this trajectory and make ourselves the most accessible and convenient health care system in history. You have given us the tools to do so. Our network of more than 727,000 providers complements care delivered in our direct system, including via telehealth, and together these represent an unprecedented range of options. Now, our task is to refine each element of the care journey so that these options are even easier to access for each Veteran in our care. We are approaching timeliness and scheduling enhancements as we have with other successful aspects of the VA MISSION Act and modernization, as a unified enterprise moving with agility and intense, resolute focus on the performance of our systems for those we serve.

VA measures and closely monitors the time from referral placement, the time a provider and Veteran decide additional care is needed, to the time that care is scheduled and delivered, both in the direct care system and in the community. These metrics are aligned with the moments in the process that matter most to Veterans, and data are collectively reviewed and actioned by leaders at multiple levels of the organization. VA continues to consistently complete urgent referrals for care in under 2 days, both in the direct system and in the community. Our teams carefully review every referral placed during the pandemic, we are also working at an enterprise level to further streamline processes and engage our strategic partners anew. We want Veterans to know we are here for them every step of the way during these challenging times, and we view this advancement as an imperative necessitating sustained, enterprise-wide attention and strategy.

Conclusion

VA is committed to shaping the future of U.S. health care on behalf of those we serve. Our ongoing modernization and focus on safety and experience in these unprecedented times is clear evidence of that leadership. We intend to stay at the leading edge of progress, achieving industry-leading timeliness and historic access and convenience. We appreciate the Committee's continued support as we pursue this goal on behalf of our Nation's Veterans.