

**STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
ON  
ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: EVALUATING VA COMMUNITY CARE**

**February 12, 2025**

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to discuss how VA ensures that Veterans have access to the excellent, timely care they have earned. I am accompanied by Dr. Sachin Yende, Chief Medical Officer of the Office of Integrated Veteran Care, Veterans Health Administration. We come to work every day with one goal in mind: to serve Veterans, their families, caregivers, and survivors as well as they have served our country.

**Expanding Health Care Access for Veterans**

At VA, we prioritize Veterans. We have expanded health care services throughout VA facilities, thereby increasing our capacity to provide direct care across many regions. We see community care as an integral part of VA care. The Department supports Veterans in choosing between receiving care directly from VA facilities or from community providers, as outlined in P.L. 15-182, the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act of 2018. Our integrated approach to total Veteran health is based on the idea that Veterans have earned the right to choose world-class health care services when and where they need them as authorized by law. Our network of community care providers effectively bridges the gaps between Veteran needs and the limitations of VA's direct care system.

Congress provided authority to VA under the MISSION Act that extended community care access for Veterans. In 2019, VA began implementing the MISSION Act and has since referred over 5.4 million unique Veterans to community care providers. Veterans have accessed more than 228 million community care appointments. The enactment of P.L. 117-168, the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act of 2022, enabled VA to expand its reach and provide health care to even more Veterans. Since the PACT Act was signed into law in August 2022, nearly 900,000 Veterans have enrolled in VA health care. The combined results of empowering Veterans to choose providers authorized by the MISSION Act, in conjunction with the expanded enrollment following enactment of the PACT Act, has resulted in VA delivering 78.8 million

appointments in VA facilities along with 53.6 million appointments in the community since August of 2022. This unprecedented enrollment and care delivery growth has resulted in the greatest number of Veterans receiving the world-class health experiences they have earned.

## **Enhancing Community Care Coordination**

With the rapid expansion of community care eligibility under the MISSION Act, the Department improved its ability to accommodate the growing number of Veteran patients referred to our community providers. Once community care eligibility is established, VA's referral process includes measures to ensure each Veteran achieves a positive outcome.

Referrals begin when VA receives a request for community care, managed through the HealthShare Referral Manager (HSRM) system. The HSRM system is used by facility community care staff to generate referrals and authorizations for Veterans receiving care in the community. Clinical and community care staff at VA medical centers, outpatient clinics, community-based outpatient clinics, and Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) offices use this solution to enhance Veteran access to care. Each facility's Community Care Integrated Team (CCIT) determines the appropriate level of care coordination for each Veteran using VA's Screening Triage Tool to aid in standardizing episodes of care. The Screening Triage Tool allows Veterans to complete clinical screenings from any connected device. Patients can report symptoms or complete standardized screening questions before their medical appointments, which results in a more efficient visit. Together with community providers, CCITs develop an individualized care coordination plan with the Veteran and their care team. Third-Party Administrator (TPA) services include scheduling, process navigation, and other follow-up activities. Care coordination involves assessing the complexity of care needs for Veterans receiving community care, care delivery, and returning health records back to VA.

## **Role of Third-Party Administrators**

TPA's play a crucial role in the VA Community Care Network by locating community providers who can provide timely, quality care. TPAs also process care claims from these providers and work to schedule appointments and support other technical aspects of Veteran care coordination. The CCIT facilitates collaboration across each component of the care coordination process. TPA actions streamline information flows among Veterans, CCITs, VA providers, and community providers. After an episode of care concludes, the CCIT connects with the Veteran to ensure all services were performed appropriately. The CCIT also facilitates any necessary patient care handoff, closing the consult.

## **Enhancing Veteran Health Care Through Innovative Technology**

As VA advances its mission to care for Veterans, we continually seek innovative approaches to the future of Veteran health care in the community. A key component of implementing change is effectively communicating Veteran needs among various stakeholders. To this end, VHA is transitioning from a blended network of call centers to a standard, enterprise-wide system called VA Health Connect. This clinical contact center modernization supports in-person care and continues to utilize telehealth capabilities, a core component of VA Health Connect. Through VA Health Connect, Veterans can engage with health care delivery at their convenience, any time or day, to discuss health concerns with a nurse. Veteran patients are empowered to contact medical support assistants for help with scheduling appointments. Veterans also have a communications channel with pharmacists to refill prescriptions and, when clinically appropriate, can meet with a provider via video appointment.

VA Health Connect is just one component of a technology modernization effort well underway, with anticipated completion in the next 2 years. Additionally, we are deploying Clinical Resource Hubs to provide virtual care options, increasing access to VHA services when local facilities face limitations in care or service capabilities.

## **Building Trust and Advancing Toward a Future of Quality Services**

VA is a trusted Veteran health care provider, furnishing high-quality care that surpasses our private sector counterparts. Veterans notice the difference. In fiscal year (FY) 2024, VA internal survey data showed an unprecedented trust rate of 92% in the Department's health service delivery, surpassing our private sector counterparts. Our longstanding relationship with Congress, and with this Subcommittee specifically, has resulted in nearly 70% of VA hospitals receiving 4 or 5 stars in the Overall Hospital Quality Star Ratings by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, compared to only 41% of non-VA hospitals. This achievement highlights our opportunity to further enhance care for Veterans.

Despite our successes, we acknowledge the need for process improvements to continue achieving positive outcomes for those who have taken on the mantle of protecting freedom. Building and maintaining trust with Veteran stakeholders is crucial for enhancing health outcomes. In 2019, VHA underwent transformational modernization, becoming a High Reliability Organization (HRO) led by VHA's HRO Steering Committee. Utilizing HRO practices results in fewer than expected accidents or harmful events, even in complex, high-risk environments where minor errors can lead to tragic results. VA established trust among its leaders and staff by implementing this effort. This transformation to an HRO unleashed incredible talent and commitment within our system and strengthened trust in VA from Veterans and the American people.

We are committed to improving safety and quality of care in VA facilities and our network of community providers. VISNs and medical centers are advancing toward HRO maturity, which is defined as instilling an organization-wide commitment to a zero-

harm approach to medical safety that aims to operate care centers without exposing staff or non-staff to injury through the implementation of systems.

In FY 2024, VA conducted more than 127.5 million healthcare appointments between direct care and community care, a 6% increase over the previous year's record volume of 119.8 million appointments. Thanks to our network of providers, we also decreased wait times while delivering more care to many Veterans, caregivers, and survivors.

## **Conclusion**

Madam Chair and Ranking Member Brownley, thank you for your continued dedication and leadership. We are pleased to share our efforts to enhance medical outcomes for our Veterans, who served to safeguard the American way of life. My team and I look forward to today's discussion.