

Statement for the Record
House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health
"Roles and Responsibilities: Evaluating VA Community Care."
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Chairman Bost, Chairwoman Miller-Meeks, Ranking Member Takano, Ranking Member Brownley, and members of the sub-committee, thank you for the opportunity to join you today to discuss the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Community Care Network (CCN.) I am the Chief Executive Officer of Optum Serve, the federal health services business of UnitedHealth Group (UHG).

I am pleased to submit this written statement for the record regarding Optum Serve's work administering the VA's CCN program in regions 1, 2, and 3, since 2018 which provides a comprehensive, high-quality approach to supporting Veterans' choice and access to the care they have earned.

On behalf of the dedicated women and men at Optum Serve, who tirelessly work to deliver solutions that meet the health needs throughout the federal government, we are thankful for our partnership with the VA, and our collaboration with Veterans and their caregivers, Veteran Service Organizations, community providers, and our exceptional program partners.

As a combat Veteran, retired Army officer, and proud father of a Soldier, I fully recognize the magnitude of the selfless sacrifices made by our Veterans and their families. Because of this, I am deeply committed and laser focused on the success of the entire VA health system, inclusive of the VA Community Care Program and Optum Serve's role and responsibility in ensuring access to quality care for our nation's Veterans. Our commitment is not only demonstrated by meeting and exceeding our requirements across all three regions, but also through the partnership we have fostered with VA at every level, and by building trusted relationships with Military and Veteran Service Organizations. The invaluable feedback from these key stakeholders offers us a sharper lens as we seek to continuously fine-tune and tailor our services to improve the Veteran's experience.

Optum Serve is honored to support health programs that touch virtually every point in a Veteran's journey, from the time they raise their right hand to take the oath until the time they separate from military service and return to civilian life as a Veteran. Here are some of the programs that we proudly support:

- **U.S. Military Entrance Processing Command:** Providing specialty consult exams in support of the U.S. Military's recruitment mission.
- **Military Health System Nurse Advice Line:** Managing the Military Health System's 24/7/365 Global Nurse Advice Line for active-duty service members, retirees, and their families.
- **Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Compensation and Pension Exams:** Ensuring quality and timely exams for Veterans and transitioning military service members through the VBA Medical Disability Exam program.

- **VA CCN Program:** Delivering quality care in the community in regions 1, 2, and 3, when and where a Veteran needs it.

Our position supporting Department of Defense (DoD) and VA programs throughout this entire lifecycle offers Optum Serve a truly unique perspective as we work restlessly to enhance the overall quality and experience of the members we serve.

Optum Serve's Support of VA CCN

Since 2019, we have focused on the ever-evolving needs of VA in support of improving Veteran access to high quality care through continuous network refinement and optimization. Our provider network offers a wide range of services including primary and specialty medical and dental care services, behavioral health, complementary and integrative health care services (e.g., chiropractic, acupuncture, and massage therapy), urgent care and transplant services.

Through the VA CCN program, we have the privilege of supporting approximately 6.5 million eligible Veterans across three regions comprised of 36 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. I vividly recall meeting with VA leaders and clinicians in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in June 2019 where we began the phased implementation of the VA CCN program and monitored the first Veteran referral for care in the community move through our collective systems. After we successfully deployed region 1 and were making strong progress deploying in regions 2 and 3, the COVID-19 pandemic struck, creating significant challenges for us and the entire healthcare system. Despite these headwinds, Optum Serve remained undeterred. Today, Optum's VA CCN program is making a clear difference in the lives of Veterans, having completed over 159 million Veteran care visits through our robust provider network of 2.4 million care sites.

But it isn't just about building the provider network. What has become increasingly clear is the importance of preserving the network for future Veterans. Timely and accurate reimbursement is crucial for maintaining our strong provider network for Veteran care. Therefore, it is of highest priority to ensure that community providers, especially smaller practices in rural areas, have the positive cash flow needed to sustain their operations. We're pleased to report that we have adjudicated over 116 million claims since program inception, and providers have been paid in an average of seven days or less. This efficiency supports future Veteran care and helps providers continue serving their broader communities.

Improving Veteran Experience & Wellness

The wellbeing and experiences of Veterans are the driving force behind everything we do. One Veteran's spouse shared a heart-wrenching story about how a gun lock, provided by an Optum Serve community care provider, saved her husband's life. In a moment of crisis, the gun lock caused just enough of a delay for her to realize what was happening. Those precious extra minutes allowed her to intervene, preventing another tragic loss. Thanks to that brief delay, her husband is still here today.

We share the unwavering belief with this committee and the VA that even one Veteran suicide is too many; which is why we do what we do. At Optum Serve, we recognize that Veteran mental health is a national issue and one of the greatest challenges we must come together to solve, and we are

working hard to move the needle in several impactful areas. To further promote Lethal Means Safety through our community providers, Optum Serve partners directly with VA's Office of Mental Health. This collaboration aims to prevent Veteran suicide by distributing gun locks to community providers, who then give them directly to Veterans. Since we began this initiative in September 2023, we have distributed over 12,000. Additionally, Optum Serve partnered with our broader organization to create and deliver tailored provider training courses on topics like *Suicide Screenings & Prevention* and *Opioid Safety Training*. We also ensured these courses provide continuing education credits, which is a great incentive for providers to increase participation.

Veteran-Centric Service & Timely Access to Care

Optum Serve is committed to our partnership with VA to identify and solve challenges which require local level relationships between our organizations. Even prior to implementation in 2019, Optum Serve established Community Care Experience Teams (CCET), comprised of Veteran Experience Officers (VEO), to provide on-the-ground support and resources to every VAMC and their staff. Optum Serve VEOs maintain strong relationships with the local VAMC and Veteran Integrated Service Network (VISN) leaders, and each of the VAMC community care offices to better meet the needs of the VA at the local level and by extension, the Veterans we collectively serve. Additionally, each VISN has an assigned and dedicated Optum Serve Provider Advocate who stands ready to support with any unique challenges a Veteran may encounter in connecting with the care they need.

One such example of the power and purpose of having dedicated Optum Serve VEO and Provider Advocates with a Veteran-centric focus is the support recently provided to a Veteran in VISN 16. This Veteran had been suffering from debilitating migraines for over a year and had recently lost his job. Optum Serve's VEO and Provider Advocate collaborated with the VAMC registered nurse to identify an out-of-network provider who offered an individualized treatment plan that the Veteran had not yet tried. This provider agreed to join CCN based on the Veteran's case and their onboarding was expedited.. As a result, the Veteran received successful treatment and experienced a significant improvement in quality of life. This is just one example of how these advocates are making a difference in helping the entire system work better.

As VA shifted their focus to fulfill their fourth mission at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Optum Serve responded to VA's immediate need for support with appointment scheduling activities and quickly pivoted to develop a scalable solution to meet individual VAMC needs. Optum Serve provided high quality appointment scheduling support to these VAMCs from February 2021 through October 31, 2024. During this period, Optum Serve supported 29 of the 109 VAMCs within our three regions, scheduling over 694,000 Veteran appointments with participating CCN providers in less than nine days on average.

In response to referral surges based on individual VAMC needs, Optum Serve quickly adapted by increasing staffing, building specialized teams based on category of care and built direct partnerships with individual VAMCs to tailor solutions as needed to address specific regional challenges and improve care delivery. One of our specialized teams was dedicated to supporting Veterans with a behavioral health referral. Every Veteran was assigned a highly trained Appointment

Scheduling Representative (ASR) who helped them identify the right provider and schedule their appointment with one of our 65,000 behavioral health providers at one of the 50,000 available locations which include over 1,100 substance abuse centers across all three regions. Each VAMC was assigned a newly created Veteran Scheduling Experience Officer (VSEO) whose primary role was staying connected to local VA staff and ensuring Veterans were appointed with the community provider to best suit their health care needs. Optum Serve's scalability and automation enabled us to meet the growing needs of Veterans while maintaining top-notch performance and service. Although VA decided to conclude our appointment scheduling activities, we stand ready to support any VAMC should the need arise again.

Access to care can come in many forms, and the COVID-19 pandemic sparked a rapid increase in telehealth services. While still small compared to VA's direct telehealth services, the use of telehealth through VA CCN has surged from double-digit visits prior to the pandemic to over 35,000 per month. This significant growth highlights the value Veterans place on the flexibility to receive care when and where they need it. To continue this work, license portability is essential, allowing a provider to deliver quality telehealth services across state lines. We look forward to working with this body to ensure they continue to have this choice for future care needs.

Ensuring High-Quality Care

Delivering high quality care for our nation's Veterans through the CCN program is our top priority. Our rigorous credentialing and recredentialing processes ensure providers meet the highest qualifications through National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) accreditation. Optum Serve has demonstrated our unwavering commitment to excellence by consistently achieving 98 percent or higher on our monthly credentialing audits conducted by VA. Through our ongoing monitoring of potential provider sanctions and exclusions, and taking appropriate actions based on the data, we uphold our dedication to delivering superior healthcare services to our Veterans. This relentless pursuit of excellence underscores our network's reputation in delivering quality healthcare. Our network of providers also stands out for its exceptional commitment to quality, and consistently far exceeds the VA's high-performing provider (HPP) benchmark of 10%. In fact, across all three regions over 60% of Optum Serve's eligible network has been recognized as a HPP as of December 31, 2024.

Optum Serve is firmly invested in upholding the highest standards by offering a clear pathway for reporting concerns about patient safety, harm, quality-of-care, and any deviations from national care standards through our Potential Quality Issue (PQI) process. Our Clinical Quality Department thoroughly reviews every PQI reported by Veterans their families, caregivers, VA staff, and providers. Additionally, our Clinical Quality Department proactively utilizes measures from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Hospital Acquired Conditions (HAC) and Hospital Acquired Infections (HAI), as well as Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality's (AHRQ) Patient Safety Indicators (PSI) to identify, and address Veteran care concerns.

Optum Serve's Clinical Quality program is devoted to improving care by reducing harm, sentinel events, serious reportable events, and medical errors. A PQI and/or Optum's claims data mining

efforts may result in a provider being reviewed by one of Optum's Peer Review Committees (Medical-Surgical, Behavioral Health, or Dental). Optum's Clinical Quality team conducts regular PQI reviews and facilitates monthly Peer Review Committee meetings to ensure provider adherence to clinical standards and implement corrective actions as needed. If an Optum Serve provider does not engage in quality improvement efforts, the Peer Review Committee may make the recommendation to remove the provider from the network. It is important to highlight that a non-voting VA representative is invited to all committee meetings to ensure transparency in the Veteran safety and quality process within the Community Care Network. Additionally, to support VA's desire to have real-time awareness of clinical quality cases moving through the system, we produced a highly touted dashboard to assist VA users with tracking, and receiving quality information in near real-time which allows for enhanced management and coordination of quality oversight between Optum Serve and VA.

Achieving quality outcomes for Veterans' health depends directly on the quality-of-care delivery. A key component in this process is the Veterans' medical record. Optum Serve educates all community providers on the importance of returning medical records to VA in a timely manner. The requirements regarding medical documentation are specifically outlined in the Optum VA CCN Provider Manual, which is an extension of every provider's contract. We also reinforce this information through various provider education modalities including virtual trainings with an Optum Serve Provider Advocate, medical documentation requirements fact sheets, and our quarterly Optum VA CCN medical and dental newsletters. To best support VA, Optum Serve established a standardized process whereby VA may escalate a request for provider education in the event medical documentation has not been received. Optum Serve's Provider Advocate team then conducts targeted educational outreach to the identified provider.

We are aware there are current barriers with this process and have partnered with the VA to identify and implement efficiencies. We believe more needs to be done to safeguard seamless sharing of these records between providers and the VA by streamlining the available pathways to transmit records and stronger oversight to verify records have been sent timely in order to create the coordination of care our Veterans deserve.

Partners in Serving the Veteran Community

We recognize that the wellbeing of our nation's heroes extends beyond the services we provide. To further our mission of ensuring the holistic wellbeing of Veterans, Service Members, and their families, Optum Serve has partnered with numerous Veteran and Military Service Organizations. Through these partnerships, we provide resources to address the physical, mental, and emotional health care needs of the military and Veteran community. Optum Serve has long-standing partnerships including numerous Veteran centric service organizations. During our quarterly Program Management Review (PMR) with VA leadership, we have coordinated a variety of engagements that emphasize our commitment to the Veteran community. For example, Optum Serve and VA leaders greeted Honor Flight Veterans from Missouri when they arrived at the WWII Memorial in Washington D.C., we tie-dyed shirts with Veterans who reside at a VA Community Living Center, we visited with Veteran caregivers at the South Carolina Fisher House and recorded individual Veteran stories which are permanently stored at the Library of Congress as part of the Veteran History

Project. Through these partnerships, we strive to create a robust support network that empowers Veterans and their families to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives while also heightening the sense of purpose and commitment of our staff.

Closing

We strongly share this Committee's dedication to improving the lives of Veterans and the well-being of our nation's heroes, which is at the center of all we do. Optum Serve has had the distinct honor to work with this Committee through the passage and/or the implementation of landmark legislation including the MISSION Act, PACT Act, Cleland Dole Act, and most recently the Elizabeth Dole Act as Congress has evolved and improved Veteran benefits and the VA's care ecosystem. We stand ready to continue working with this Committee and the rest of the 119th Congress on future legislation aimed at improving the benefits and services for our Veterans.

In closing, I am humbled and deeply grateful for the opportunity to share this statement, highlighting Optum Serve's unwavering dedication to Veterans through the VA CCN program. We remain steadfast in our commitment to enhancing the experiences and outcomes for those we serve. Our passionate and devoted team eagerly anticipates ongoing collaboration with the VA, this sub-committee, and all our partners. Together, we will ensure that our nation's heroes receive the exceptional health care they have rightfully earned and truly deserve.