

Statement for the Record
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Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and members of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs: Chief Executive Officer of Optum Serve Health Services, I am pleased to submit this written statement for the record regarding our work on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) - Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Medical Disability Exam (MDE) program in the four geographic and pre-discharge regions.

On behalf of all the women and men at UnitedHealth Group (UHG), including Optum Serve Health Services, who work every day to help people live healthier lives and make the health system work better for everyone, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss our delivery of medical disability examinations, in support of the VBA, Veterans and their families, Service Members, Veteran and Military Service Organizations, community providers, and our program partners. Optum Serve Health Services brings parent company UnitedHealth Group's (UHG) broad commercial and government experience, and extensive resources with Optum's innovation, technology, scalability, and federal healthcare program experience to ensure our nation's Veterans and Service Members receive quality, objective, and timely compensation and pension examinations in accordance with VBA regulations and the terms of our contracts.

Let me also acknowledge the Committee's important work to pass the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act for short, this past year. This important legislation greatly expands health care and benefits for Veterans exposed to toxic substances and represents our nation's commitment to taking care of those who have served. Optum Serve Health Services is similarly committed to serving Veterans and Service Members and supporting our government partners in the execution of their missions. Our VBA MDE program is a prime example of this commitment as demonstrated by our performance of this work for more than a decade, our responsiveness to the challenges faced during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, our rapid expansion to support the increased and sustained volumes resulting from the passage of the PACT Act, and our continued collaborative partnership with the VBA.

Optum Serve Health Services, formerly Logistics Health Incorporated (LHI), began performing medical disability exams on behalf of the VA in 2011. Starting with one contract managed by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), Optum Serve Health Services, custom designed a program and a system to process examination requests efficiently and accurately. In 2018, oversight of the MDE program shifted from the VHA to the VBA and the second generation of MDE contracts were awarded. Optum Serve Health Services initially held competitive awards for contracts in Regions one (1), two (2) and three (3), and in 2021, Optum Serve Health Services was awarded a single-year, sole-source contract for Region four (4). Then in 2022, Optum Serve Health Services received competitive awards for the Region four (4) (March 2022) and the Pre-discharge contracts (April 2022), resulting in our current program which completes more than 20,000 appointments per week across five separate contracts and in all 50 states.

At the heart of the Optum Serve Health Services VBA MDE program is a network of certified compensation and pension examiners and diagnostic service providers. We have more than 4,300 examiners and over 1,900 diagnostic service providers operating in our network of clinics, provider offices and mobile examination units. The Optum branded and vendor partner clinics serve as the backbone of our network where examiners conduct compensation and pension examinations on a full-time basis. These clinics are located in larger markets and/or close to military bases where consistent demand for exam services exists. The clinics contain a mix of examiners (general medical, behavioral health, audiology, optometry, dental), diagnostic radiology and other diagnostic testing services based on the needs of the market and the availability of contracted examiners and diagnostic service providers in each specific market. Contracted examiners and diagnostic service providers add depth and breadth to our network and allow us to look at additional options when sourcing exam locations closer to where Veterans and Service Members live. Single examiner offices embedded in existing medical practices and our mobile medical units give us flexibility to provide services in more rural or underserved areas as well as addressing surges in demand in larger markets. Individual examiners also travel to different locations as needed to help fill temporary capacity gaps, provide services to incarcerated or home bound Veterans, and to provide additional coverage in rural communities.

Regardless of where an examination occurs, Optum Serve Health Services is committed to ensuring the highest levels of quality for the services we provide through the VBA MDE program. Each Optum Serve Health Services examiner is credentialed by Optum Serve Health Service's National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) certified Provider Credentialing Department and must complete the VBA required training courses in the VHA TrainingFinder Real-time Affiliate-Integrated Network (TRAIN) learning management system. They are also supported and tutored by our own dedicated provider training and support team, who provide additional training, tutor examiners that need assistance, and create references and resources that are available to our examiners in our provider portal. We also provide tutor examiners should our providers need any additional support. Once an exam occurs, all required documentation is reviewed through system validation and manual checks by our Clinical Quality Review Department, prior to electronic submission to the VBA.

We are committed to providing a high-quality experience for the Veterans and Service Members we are honored to serve. In addition to the training and internal quality reviews performed by Optum Serve Health Services, we also work collaboratively with the VBA MDE Program Office and VA Regional Offices to identify and correct quality and patient experience issues. Optum Serve Health Services receives monthly reports and audit scores from the VBA MDE Program Office Quality Department as well as the VBA Veteran and Service Member experience survey results for each contract. Both of these reports are tied to performance metrics in our contracts and are part of the oversight the VBA exercises on our work. They communicate trends and identify areas for improvement as well as areas of outstanding performance during recurring quality, operations, and performance calls. Optum Serve Health Services uses this information to make adjustments to our processes and communicate necessary changes and adjustments to our entire network. The VBA Veteran and Service Member experience survey is administered by another VBA contractor and provides valuable feedback on Optum Serve Health Service's examiners and other aspects of the program. In partnership with VBA's MDE Program Office, the Veteran and Service Member feedback is leveraged as we continuously review the quality and experience provided by the program. We continuously monitor examiner training and credentialing and investigate all inquiries. Any examiner who does not maintain the proper credentialing and training, or who does not meet the quality and experience requirements of the contract is removed from our network. During the past year, our program quality audit and patient experience survey scores have consistently exceeded the requirements in the contract.

These positive changes in quality and member experience occurred during a demanding time for the program as we exited the pandemic and then responded to the increased demand resulting from enactment of the PACT Act. During the pandemic, face-to-face exams were temporarily suspended by the VBA, COVID precautions were put in place to protect Veterans and Service Members, and changes were made to scheduling and exam processing guidelines to avoid negative impacts to claims. Once face-to-face exams resumed and operations normalized, our program leveraged flexibilities in the use of telehealth and license portability legislation to schedule and complete exams, extending the reach of our network and providing options to Veterans and Service Members to receive their examinations in the way that was most convenient for them, while still maintaining objectivity and quality. Optum Serve Health Services used telehealth primarily for behavioral health exams and leveraged our fleet of mobile medical units and traveling examiners to provide services to Veterans and Service Members in rural and underserved areas. Telehealth, mobile medical units and travel examiners were also utilized to respond to fluctuations in exam volume in larger markets or covering for examiners who were personally impacted by COVID or chose not to practice during the pandemic. Even when the VBA adjusted its processes and guidelines in response to the relaxing of pandemic restrictions at the start of 2022, telehealth and license portability remained important enablers for Optum Serve's MDE program. Many behavioral health providers have not returned to face-to-face practice and continue to see patients remotely. The use of mobile medical units and traveling examiners has only increased as the volume of exam requests grew with the PACT Act and the health care industry continues to feel the reverberations of the pandemic. Optum Serve Health Services recommends making license portability provisions permanent and adding dentists, optometrists, and other types of licensed health care professionals to the legislation as this will provide additional flexibility and capacity to meet demand while providing options to support Veteran and Service Member preferences.

Since the passage of the PACT Act, the volume of weekly exam requests Optum Serve Health Services receives from the VBA has increased by approximately 45%. Optum Serve Health Services responded by opening or expanding clinics in 78 different locations, adding six (6) mobile medical units, and increasing appointment volume by 51%, resulting in a 47.5% increase in completed exam service requests per week. Even with these increases, our expansion efforts are ongoing as the VBA projects demand for exams will continue to increase into 2024. We use a continuous assessment process to monitor demand, identify changes in demand patterns, and initiate examiner network adjustments. In addition,

we continue to enhance our systems and exam processes to best utilize our examiner's time, streamline the exam experience, and increase throughput without sacrificing quality or member experience.

Overall, the industry faces a historic maldistribution of medical professionals and increasing administrative demands on providers, such as the modality, quality, and length of the training required for MDE providers to become certified compensation and pension examiners. We routinely encounter medical providers who want to work with us in support of Veterans and Service Members, but then decline to become part of our network when we present them with the training requirements. We are currently collaborating with the VBA MDE Program Office, and they have been open to feedback about adjustments to the training courses in VHA TRAIN. We believe that through collaboration between the VBA and the MDE program vendors, we can identify ways to decrease the total time required to complete the training while retaining the key content necessary for continued high quality delivery, and we hope that Congress will be supportive of these efforts. This is especially important in the context of the challenging health care industry labor market. Many providers and other types of medical professionals left health care during the pandemic, and the industry continues to change as we move into the post-pandemic period. In addition to the historic shortages of providers, technicians, and support staff in rural and underserved areas, there now seems to be a true shortage of providers in the aggregate, making it extremely important for the program to use different types of medical providers to perform this critical work. The continued use of mid-level medical providers as well as physicians, both general medical practitioners and specialists, is critical to meeting the demand of examination requests from the VBA.

Optum Serve Health Services supports the end-to-end examination process and through collaboration with the VBA and our own team's pursuit of innovation, we are evolving our processes to continue to find ways to better serve Veterans and Service Members. First, with communication and scheduling, our customer service, operations, and information technology teams are implementing multiple changes to engage Veterans and Service Members digitally and improve the appointment scheduling process. We updated our entire caller identification system so our outbound calls can easily be recognized, and Veterans and Services Members know they are coming from a valid source. Each member is contacted through multiple channels (text, email, phone) and then allowed to indicate their preferred method of communication going forward.

A second area with significant enhancement underway is the receipt and preparation of the claims files and supporting documents that are shared with examiners. In coordination with the VBA MDE Program Office, the process for receiving the claims files from VBA is being updated so the annotations made by VA Regional Office staff as they develop the claim will be exported as part of the file the vendors receive. This will ensure the information in the claims file that is most relevant is easily seen by the examiners who complete the exams. This is in addition to other changes made in the past year to more clearly identify relevant evidence, including layperson statements in the examination scheduling requests and the claims file. These changes will improve our examiners' ability to provide comprehensive and high-quality examinations, reduce rework requests, and likely result in fewer appeals. In addition to these changes made in collaboration with the VBA, Optum Serve Health Services also continues to refine our automated and manual processes for preparing the claims files for the examiners. Every claim file is reviewed, and key information is identified for examiners to ensure it is not missed during the examination process.

A final area to highlight is our focus on reducing barriers for Veterans and Service Members to get to appointments, consistent with Optum Serve Health Service's overall focus on health equity. The VBA reimburses Veterans for their travel to and from appointments, however, Veterans often indicate they do not have reliable transportation or cannot pay the money up front to travel to appointments. The Optum Serve Health Services MDE Program Operations team constantly looks at these challenges, interfaces with the VBA MDE Program Office and the VA Regional Offices and seeks to remove barriers to appointment attendance. In some cases, this means submitting a medical travel request and receiving approval from the VBA for special travel support. In other cases, we may coordinate a home-bound exam or utilize an Optum Serve Health Services mobile unit to offer services at or near a member's home. All of this is done in conjunction with the VBA and within the bounds of our current contracts. In addition to these methods, Optum Serve Health Services often goes above and beyond contract requirements by arranging for mileage reimbursement payments prior to an appointment or we will arrange and pay for the transportation ourselves. Earlier this calendar year, we started a transportation pilot with one of the premier ride share providers to supply transportation for Veterans to their appointments. In delivering this pilot, we coordinate with the Veteran directly to schedule their appointment and then also schedule rides to and from the appointment, easing the upfront burden and reducing out-of-pocket costs. Optum Serve Health Services will continue close collaboration with the VBA MDE Program Office by sharing the data and results from this pilot to support further evaluation of including transportation services such as this in the MDE contracts.

Optum Serve Health Services is committed to delivering a high-quality program that meets or exceeds our MDE contractual obligations in support of the overall health of those who have served our great Nation. Our highly dedicated program team works very closely with the VBA MDE Program Office and has established a robust cadence of connections around operations, quality, systems integration, and overall program performance. The VBA MDE Program Office conducts frequent audits on mileage reimbursement, scheduling and appointment completion processes, examiner training and credentialing, exam quality, contract performance, monthly invoices, and many other aspects of the program. They are receptive to feedback about program guidelines and requirements, and consistently offer support and guidance on difficult cases.

In closing, we appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement for the record to provide information regarding our work in support of the VBA. Thank you for your continued efforts to shape legislation that reduces barriers to access, allows medical professionals to deliver services across the Nation, increases coverage for members, and streamlines the claims and examination processes. Our highly dedicated team looks forward to our continued collaboration with the VBA, this Subcommittee, and all of our partners, as we collectively ensure our Nation's heroes continue to receive the health care they have earned and deserve.