

Congressman Salud Carbajal
24th District of California
Testimony before the Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans' Affairs
April 2, 2019

Chairwoman Wasserman-Shultz and Ranking Member Carter,

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to come and testify on the FY20 Veterans Affairs budget request.

I have the honor of representing the 40,000 veterans living in the beautiful Central Coast of California, and I am here today to share with you some challenges these veterans face today—which I hope can be addressed in the FY2020 appropriations bill.

Last year, I testified before the Committee on Veterans Affairs presenting the same challenges that I will to you.

The number one challenge for the veterans in my district continues to be the VA phone system and their inability to be connected to their local Veterans Affairs Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs) by phone.

Currently, when veterans call the CBOCs, they are routed to the Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System and end up waiting up to an hour before getting connected to a representative. Often, they are unable to get through at all.

I have personally had this experience where my call was never connected to an actual person, and I just gave up.

This creates a major situation for the veterans as they are unable to make and/or change medical appointments on the phone requiring them to go to the clinic just to make an appointment. And for many veterans, this lack of accessibility deters them from pursuing the medical care they need.

The phone system must be changed in order to accommodate demand, whether it is having the local CBOCs directly receive the calls or increasing personnel at the major VA health systems so that veterans are not waiting on the phone for extended periods of time.

Another major challenge veterans face in my district is the lack of access to transportation.

I represent a very large district that spans hundreds of miles of the Central Coast.

My district is not in close proximity to a VA Hospital.

The closest VA Hospital is the Greater Los Angeles VA and it takes veterans in my district approximately 5-7 hours to get there depending on LA traffic.

And as I have testified before the VA Committee last year, there continues to be only one bus serving my district. This one bus must make six stops before reaching the VA Hospital in LA.

Given the lack of other transportation options, this one bus route leaves a very short window of time available to the veterans to access the health services they need—between the time the bus finally arrives at the hospital and time they must board the bus again to make it back home that night.

In too many instances, veterans are either unable to fit all their appointments into one day or they miss their ride home.

Last year, I offered a floor amendment increasing funding for the Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) in an effort to provide more transportation options for veterans. As you know, the VTP includes programs such as Beneficiary Travel, Veterans Transportation Service, and the Highly Rural Transportation Grants.

During the amendment debate, it was evident that veterans in many districts were being impacted by the lack of transportation options.

With this Committee's support, especially the support of then-Ranking Member Wasserman-Shultz and then-Chairman Dent, we were able to pass the amendment with bipartisan support and include the additional funding in the House bill.

Unfortunately, the increased funding was not included in the conference report.

So I am here, today, to once again ask for the support of this Committee, in providing increased funding for the Veterans Transportation Program as it will benefit veterans across the country in seeking the health care they need and deserve.