

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI-At-Large)
Testimony before the House Veterans Affairs Committee
Wednesday, May 16, 2018

I would like to thank Chairman Roe, Ranking Member Walz, and the Members of this Committee for allowing me to speak today on the issues affecting the approximately 8,000 veterans residing in my district, the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The Virgin Islands currently houses two VA clinics, one on St. Thomas and one on St. Croix, but no VA hospital. Although the CHOICE program is available in the Virgin Islands, some doctors are hesitant to participate due to delayed payments and being in a small market. This further exacerbates the issue of having only a small number of medical specialists capable of providing necessary service. In one case, a veteran required a heart specialist, but because only one was working in the territory, the veteran had to wait two months for an appointment. This is unacceptable.

As a result of these limited resources, many veterans must communicate with and travel to the VA hospital in Puerto Rico, which leads to several major issues. First, veterans in some cases must pay up front for airfare and a night at a hotel in Puerto Rico due to appointment times and limited airline schedules. Additionally, there is a hardship when they have to bring a companion. Second, communications

barriers sometimes emerge because of significantly differing dialects and language barriers. Third, numerous veterans have mentioned that they feel disadvantaged and prejudiced against when interacting with the VA hospital in Puerto Rico due to race and residency. Many Virgin Islands veterans have stories of abuse and mistreatment that are, in many cases, hard to prove and thus seldom recorded.

Virgin Islands veterans also complain that they must exert unnecessary effort to prove that their disabilities are service-related in order to receive the benefits they deserve. Vietnam-era veterans have expressed concerns about their burden of proof that post-traumatic stress disorder and exposure to Agent Orange are results of their military service. Despite the VA's recent efforts to revisit this issue, many veterans and their families believe that too little has changed and that these new efforts are inadequate for a population that placed their lives on the line for their country.

All American veterans deserve a commitment from their country and government that proper care will be provided, regardless of geographic location. As the hospitals in the Virgin Islands are reconstructed following the destruction of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, I request that the Department of Veterans Affairs and the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees consider funding a new component of the hospital system dedicated to veterans

and capable of accommodating more severe healthcare needs than the clinics alone can provide.

I thank you for your consideration and encourage you to increase the federal commitment to the embattled veterans of the U.S. Virgin Islands.