

House Committee on Veterans Affairs Member Day Testimony

Rep. Greg Gianforte (MT-At Large)

Chairman Roe and Ranking Member Walz, I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you regarding proposals for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

This committee has worked effectively to ensure we keep our promises to veterans who have sacrificed so much for this country. I applaud your efforts of working both to ensure the VA has the resources it needs to do its job and to hold the VA accountable.

As you are aware, more work remains to achieve both priorities.

Montana is unique. We have the second highest number of veterans per capita. Our state is also vast. If you were to drive across Montana, you would travel the same distance were you to drive from here to Chicago. Montana veterans can drive 300 miles for an appointment and another 300 miles to return home. They may have to repeat these long drives for follow-up appointments. This process burdens our rural veterans with greater stress and increased costs.

Veterans in Montana deserve timely, reliable, accessible health care.

Veterans throughout Montana tell me the quality of care the VA system provides is good, but the problem is getting it. Steve, a veteran from Hamilton, waited seven weeks to get an MRI and four months for approval for a critical surgery.

Our local VA health facilities are aware of the issue, but their staff has expressed frustration about a lack of support from VISN and the central office to improve referral systems.

Ensuring rural communities have access to VA health care starts with ensuring that the VA facilities there have adequate health resources and the leadership to manage them. One approach is to provide greater incentives for health care professionals to train and move to these areas and to simultaneously reduce administrative growth at the VISN and national levels. Steady management at the state level is crucial, and constant management changes are a disservice to our veterans and health care providers.

The CHOICE program is an innovative idea that has been poorly executed. Physicians' pay should be prompt and reliable, and the CHOICE program has failed to execute this. I heard from a health care provider in Livingston who was not paid for more than eight months. Some providers have indicated they will no longer accept veterans because of lengthy delays in payment – nearly two years in some cases.

Doctors want to treat our veterans, and pay for their services should be on time and consistent.

To improve the CHOICE program, this committee has moved legislation that enhances veteran care in the community with the VA MISSION Act. This is critically important.

Program reforms should ensure that authorizations for care, services to veterans, and payments to physicians occur promptly and reliably.