

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

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Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the efforts that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) VA has taken to improve access, patient care, and accountability. I am accompanied by Shannon Novotny, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16 Acting Deputy Network Director and Peter C. Dancy, Jr., Alexandria VA Health Care System Medical Center Director and a 22-year Army Veteran.

VA remains committed to ensuring that America's Veterans have access to the health care they have earned through their service. Veterans are demanding more services from VA than ever before. From March 1, 2015, through February 29, 2016, Alexandria VAHCS completed more than 244,000 appointments; this represents an increase of 4,407 appointments (1.83 percent) over the same time last year.

Even as VA becomes more productive, the demand for benefits and services from Veterans of all eras continues to increase. VA's top priority is to improve access to

care for every Veteran who needs it.

As a whole, VA is working to rebuild trust with Veterans and the American people, improve service delivery, and set the course for long-term VA excellence and reform, while delivering better access to care. This initiative is called MyVA. All of us in the VA health care system are focused on this initiative. The first priority of MyVA is to fix the access issues and continue working to reduce the wait times for Veterans who need our services.

Access

The focused Access Stand Down events in November 2015 and February 2016 have addressed Veterans with urgent needs and significantly reduced the number of Veterans waiting for care. Alexandria VAHCS completed 112 combined Veteran appointments at the Alexandria campus and Lafayette Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) during the November 2015 Stand Down. They also completed 134 combined Veteran appointments at the Alexandria campus, Fort Polk CBOC, and Lafayette CBOC during the February 2016 Stand Down.

It is important for Veterans to be in control of their health care. This means changing our old systems that have been in place for decades at VA, to a system that works for Veterans and is focused on contemporary practices in access. That is why the Under Secretary for Health developed the “MyVA Access Declaration,” which is a set of foundational principles for every VA employee to improve and ensure access to care. The MyVA Access’ goal for 2016 is when a Veteran calls or visits primary care at a VA medical center, their clinical needs will be addressed that day. This initiative and

the MyVA Access Declaration represent VA's pledge to improve access to care for all Veterans seeking VA health services.

Two of Secretary McDonald's Breakthrough Priorities focus squarely on health care outcomes: improving access to care and improving community care. Moving toward long-term transformation, the Alexandria VAHCS has already implemented a number of actions to address access, quality, and patient satisfaction within the larger transformation of MyVA.

- Alexandria VAHCS completed 93.28 percent of appointments in April 2016 within 30 days of the clinically indicated or Veteran's preferred date.
- Alexandria VAHCS increased its total outpatient unduplicated encounters by 1.49 percent from fiscal year (FY) 2014 to FY 2015. This equals roughly 6,165 additional completed encounters for our Veterans.
- Alexandria VAHCS has a 97 percent utilization rate for Care in the Community referrals through the Veterans Choice Program (the Choice Program), authorized by the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014. There have been 4,361 consults to VA Community Care via the Choice Program this fiscal year.
- Alexandria VAHCS offers an extensive community provider network of over 1,000 providers through the Patient-Centered Community Care/Choice Program, and more are joining each month.

- Alexandria VAHCS is the health care provider of choice for 31,998 Veterans within our catchment area. Of these, 25,872 Veterans receive Primary Care Services.
- Alexandria VAHCS is activating two new permanent CBOCs: Lafayette, Louisiana CBOC and Lake Charles, Louisiana CBOC.
 - The current Lafayette CBOC provides Primary Care to 7,351 Veterans.
 - The current Lake Charles CBOC provides Primary Care to 1,809 Veterans.
- Alexandria VAHCS provides Telehealth to 3,958 Veterans, or 12.37 percent of our Veteran population. Telehealth services have been expanded to CBOCs for Primary Care, Mental Health, and Specialty Services and these are critical to expanding access to VA care.

Patient Care

The Alexandria VAHCS utilizes sign-in kiosks to assess patient satisfaction in terms of their ability to schedule an appointment when they want it. As of June 3, 2016, 90% of Veterans utilizing the sign-in kiosks at the facility were completely satisfied or satisfied with their ability to receive care when they wanted it. We want to ensure that we can say that there are no Veterans who need care now who are not receiving it. We are not fully there yet, but that is the direction in which we are moving.

The Alexandria VAHCS Director has emphasized to Veterans that he wants the Alexandria VAHCS to be the provider of choice within the community. To that end,

below are some of the initiatives that have been put in place to address patient care issues within the community:

Between February 27, 2016, and June 5, 2016, Alexandria VAHCS decreased the amount of appointments at Level 1 clinics (defined as clinical services judged to have higher relative risk and more time sensitivity) from 354 appointments to 63 appointments over 90 days, resulting in an 82.2-percent decrease.

VA has partnered with the Veterans Engineering Resource Center for the MyVA Access initiative, which will focus on improving access to care for our Veterans across the Nation. Alexandria VAHCS is scheduled to have their initial site visit with the Veterans Engineering Resource Center the week of June 13-17, 2016.

Alexandria VA HCS has also hired a full-time group practice manager who will provide general oversight for all ambulatory care access at the Alexandria VAHCS.

In April 2016, the Alexandria VAHCS Director held a Veteran town hall meeting in Natchitoches, Louisiana to hear Veteran concerns; Approximately 50 Veterans attended. Town hall meetings will continue, with the next scheduled for June 29, 2016, in Lake Charles, Louisiana. To ensure follow-up on actions on the concerns expressed by Veterans at the April 2016 Town Hall in Natchitoches, Louisiana, the Alexandria VAHCS Director will hold another Town Hall meeting in July 2016.

In partnership with the Office of Patient Centered Care, the Alexandria VAHCS has begun engaging employees in Mil-X training, which is an “experience” that provides awareness, insight, and understanding of Military Culture to help facilitate a healing relationship with the Veterans we serve. The main objectives are to develop a better understanding of basic Military Culture, align Military Culture with VA’s Mission and

Core Values, and connect effectively with Veterans to improve the Veterans experience. Since May 2, 2016, 63 employees have attended this interactive training. Trainings will continue until all staff has the opportunity to experience this model.

Accountability

The Alexandria VAHCS Director also has emphasized that he would like the Alexandria VAHCS to be the health care employer of choice. He has held eight employee town hall meetings at the local facility and at CBOCs to hear employee concerns, address rumors, and to share the direction the HCS is headed with a focus on the I-CARE values of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence.

He has also initiated recognition of employees who have exhibited I-CARE values through weekly presentations at an executive morning meeting using I-CARE certificates. These certificates give supervisors an opportunity to recognize employees who have demonstrated I-CARE attributes through their work. To date, over 15 certificates have been awarded. Supervisors have taken the initiative to replicate this recognition at their own staff meetings.

Each year during patient safety week, the Alexandria VAHCS Director issues a memorandum to all staff regarding the culture of safety and the importance that each individual makes to the organization by reporting unsafe conditions, adverse events, and near-miss incidents. We are deeply committed to promoting a culture of safety in this organization by emphasizing “how” an event occurred rather than “who” may have made an error. Patient events are discussed in a supportive, non-punitive environment, using open communication to improve processes and prevent a recurrence of the event.

We are dedicated to developing strong leaders devoted to fostering a foundation of respect, accountability, and responsibility at every level of the organization.

Conclusion

VA is committed to improving access, patient care, and accountability to better serve our Veterans. We realize the significant work that remains ahead. The good news is that moving forward, along with Congress' assistance, we have an opportunity to reshape the future and make long-lasting valuable changes. Mr. Chairman, this concludes my testimony. We appreciate your support and look forward to responding to any questions you may have.