

JON TESTER, MONTANA  
CHAIRMAN  
PATTY MURRAY, WASHINGTON  
BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT  
SHERROD BROWN, OHIO  
RICHARD BLUMENTHAL, CONNECTICUT  
MAZIE HIRONO, HAWAII  
JOE MANCHIN III, WEST VIRGINIA  
KYRSTEN SINEMA, ARIZONA  
MAGGIE HASSAN, NEW HAMPSHIRE  
TONY McCLAIN, STAFF DIRECTOR

# United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

JERRY MORAN, KANSAS  
RANKING MEMBER  
JOHN BOOZMAN, ARKANSAS  
BILL CASSIDY, LOUISIANA  
MIKE ROUNDS, SOUTH DAKOTA  
THOM TILLIS, NORTH CAROLINA  
DAN SULLIVAN, ALASKA  
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE  
KEVIN CRAMER, NORTH DAKOTA  
TOMMY TUBERVILLE, ALABAMA  
JON TOWERS, STAFF DIRECTOR

February 23, 2022

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough  
Secretary of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough,

I write to discuss the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) plans for improving appointment scheduling and consultation management for our nation's veterans. Whether appointments occur in VA facilities or in the community, the Department must ensure veterans receive timely access to care. Scheduling and consult management is an important component of that access.

Public Law 116-315, the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (the Isakson and Roe Act), signed into law in January 2021, included Congress' effort to enhance veterans' ability to receive timely care by seeking to improve administrative processes. The Accountability in Department of Veterans Affairs Scheduling and Consult Management Act, a bill I authored to bolster health care access and timeliness through improvements to VA's appointment scheduling processes, is included in the law. Section 3102 of the Isakson and Roe Act includes a part of my bill that requires a third-party audit of scheduling of appointments and management of consultations for care provided by VA and non-VA providers.

The scheduling audit, conducted by Titan Alpha, LLC and comprised of twenty-two elements, resulted in the "Nationwide Report on the Facility-level Audit of the Veterans Health Administration Scheduling of Appointments and the Management of Consultations for Healthcare." I was encouraged to see the audit found VA to be generally compliant with established policies for appointment scheduling, consultations, and referrals. Nevertheless, this audit also notes numerous areas for improvement in VA's scheduling practices. After reviewing these recommendations, it is clear to me VA must take steps towards improving the appointment scheduling and consultation management processes.

Below are my observations on specific issues addressed in the audit.

## **Key Performance Indicators**

I concur with the audit's recommendation that VA establish additional Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to more accurately and completely measure appointment scheduling metrics. Establishing additional KPIs – in addition to reevaluating and monitoring existing KPIs – will be crucial to ensuring the accuracy and comprehensiveness of future audits and will allow VA to make informed decisions regarding any future improvements to appointment scheduling

procedures. It will also help Congress hold VA accountable on performance-related concerns. Based on this recommendation, I would appreciate a response to the following questions:

- Does VA plan to identify additional KPIs based on the recommendations of the Titan Alpha audit, including KPIs for “time between each step of the care coordination and referral processes” and “level of urgency criteria?”
- Does VA plan to evaluate the thresholds established in existing KPIs to determine if these levels are still relevant?
- Does VA plan to track and monitor existing KPIs via a dashboard, in order to better visualize trends and identify areas for improvement?

### **Consistency and Standardization**

I also support the audit’s view that VA would benefit from revising and standardizing directives, standard operating procedures, and terminology used in appointment scheduling. I urge VA to consider the audit’s recommendations to create a standardized documentation tool to determine reasons for appointment delays or cancellations, update standard operating procedures for employees to make important clarifications, and standardize the terminology and definitions used across all guidance documents.

I was recently pleased to learn VA has completed the requirements of Section 3101(b)(1) and (2) of the Isakson and Roe Act to certify and train individuals involved in scheduling appointments for veterans on each step of the scheduling process. I am hopeful this effort will ultimately help veterans receive more timely access to care. I believe the recommendations in the audit surrounding consistency and standardization will complement VA’s recent efforts on scheduling. As such, I have several questions about VA’s plans to further improve the scheduling of appointments.

- Does VA plan to create a standardized documentation tool in order to track reasons for appointment delays or cancellations?
- Will VA clarify descriptions in its standard operating procedures based on the recommendations of the audit?
- Will VA standardize terminology and create definitions for terms used across directives and guidance documents for employees?
- Does VA plan to identify and implement appointment scheduling best practices based on the findings of this audit? Will these best practices be incorporated into directives and guidance documents?

### **Community Care**

Given the scope of this audit, Titan Alpha notes it was not possible to determine specific reasons for delays in community care. I agree with the auditor that VA should assess the reasons for impediments and delays for veterans receiving community care to identify potential interventions to improve compliance. The Department must ensure it is providing timely care for our veterans, no matter where they seek health care services. As such, in addition to the questions above, I would also appreciate an update on any efforts taken by VA to explore this issue in order to ensure veterans are getting the full benefit of programs Congress has created to help deliver the care they have earned.

Taking the time to analyze and improve VA's appointment scheduling and consultation management systems is a crucial step towards ensuring that our nation's veterans receive timely and accessible care. I look forward to hearing more from you about these critical issues.

Sincerely,



---

Jon Tester  
Chairman  
Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs