

**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE ERIC K. SHINSEKI  
SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
BEFORE THE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**

**May 15, 2014**

Chairman Sanders, Ranking Member Burr, and Distinguished Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss with you the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system. We, at VA, are committed to consistently providing the high quality care our Veterans have earned and deserve in order to improve their health and well-being. We owe that to each and every Veteran that is under our care.

It is important to understand the size and scope of VA care—the largest integrated healthcare delivery system in the United States.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) operates over 1,700 points of care, including 150 medical centers, 820 community-based outpatient clinics, 300 Vet Centers, 135 community living centers, 104 domiciliary rehabilitation treatment programs, and 70 mobile Vet Centers. VHA conducts approximately 236,000 health care appointments—each day—and approximately 85 million appointments each year. Over 300,000 VHA leaders and health care employees strive to provide exceptional care to approximately 6.485 million Veterans and other beneficiaries annually.

VA provides safe, effective healthcare, equal to or exceeding the industry standard in many areas. We care deeply for every Veteran we have the privilege to serve. VA is committed to operating with unmatched transparency and fostering an environment that reports and evaluates errors in order to avoid repeating them in the future; one of our most important priorities is to keep our patients safe in our facilities.

That said, there are always areas that need improvement. We can, and we must do better. VA takes any allegations about patient care or employee misconduct very seriously. I am personally angered and saddened by any adverse consequence that a Veteran might experience while in, or as a result of, our care.

In response to allegations about scheduling and delays at the Phoenix VA Health Care System (PVAHCS), I invited an independent investigation by the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) to conduct a comprehensive, thorough and timely review. If these allegations are true, they are completely unacceptable—to Veterans, to me, and to our dedicated VHA employees. If they are substantiated by OIG, responsible and timely action will be taken.

It is important to allow OIG's independent and objective review to proceed until completion, and OIG has advised VA against providing information that could potentially compromise their ongoing review. However, at the request of OIG, I have placed three

PVAHCS employees on administrative leave until further notice, including two senior executives.

We will work with OIG to ensure that the need to keep the public informed is balanced with our obligation to preserve the integrity of an important OIG investigation. I have also directed VHA to complete a nationwide access review. The purpose of this review is to ensure a full understanding of VA's scheduling policy and continued integrity in managing patient access to care.

Veterans deserve to have full faith in their VA. Any adverse event for a Veteran within our care is one too many. Where challenges occur, VA takes direct action to review each incident, and puts in place corrections to improve system issues and quality of care provided. We hold employees accountable for any misconduct; we incorporate lessons learned to avoid and mitigate future incidents throughout the entire healthcare system. VHA's first priority is to notify the Veteran or their representative of the adverse event, as well as the patient's rights and recourses.

VHA is committed to a process of full and open disclosure to Veterans and their families. We participate in multiple external, independent reviews every year to ensure safe and quality healthcare. VA will continue to develop and sustain reliable systems and train employees to prevent and detect avoidable harms before they happen. When this does not happen, we act to take necessary corrective actions in order to restore the confidence and trust in the system that serves so many.

### **Quality of Care**

Every year, our dedicated VA employees, many of whom are Veterans themselves, provide 6.3 million Veterans with the excellent care they have earned and deserve. VA provides a broad range of primary care, specialty care, and related medical and social support services. We have established a record of safe, exceptional care that is consistently recognized by independent reviews, organizations, and experts on key health care quality measures. Every VA medical facility is accredited by The Joint Commission, the independent, non-profit organization that ensures the quality of U.S. healthcare by its intensive evaluation of more than 20,000 healthcare organizations. In 2012, The Joint Commission, recognized 19 VA hospitals as top performers, and that number increased to 32 in 2013.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) is the Nation's only cross-industry measure of customer satisfaction, providing benchmarking between the public and private sectors. In their most recent, independent customer service survey, ACSI ranks VA customer satisfaction among the best in the Nation—equal to or better than ratings for private sector hospitals.

Since 2004, on average, the ACSI survey has consistently shown that Veterans give VA hospitals and clinics a higher customer satisfaction score than patients give

private sector hospitals. Veterans strongly endorsed VA healthcare, with 91 percent offering positive assessments of inpatient care and 92 percent for outpatient care. Additionally, when asked if they would use a VA medical center the next time they need inpatient or outpatient care, Veterans overwhelmingly indicated they would (96 and 95 percent, respectively).

Of our over 300,000 employees in the VA healthcare system, our medical providers and appointment scheduling personnel were considered highly courteous with scores of 92 and 91, respectively, while VA medical providers ranked high in professionalism (90 percent positive). Despite these and other favorable statistics, we know that we can always improve.

### **Improving and Expanding Access**

The number of Veterans receiving VA benefits and services has grown steadily and is projected to continue to rise as ongoing conflicts end and more Servicemembers transition to Veteran status. In 2015, the number of patients treated within VA's healthcare system is projected to reach 6.7 million, an increase of nearly one million patients (17.4 percent) since 2009.

VA continues to improve access to VA services by opening new facilities and points of care, and improving current facilities and points of care closer to where Veterans live. Since January 2009, we have added approximately 55 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC), for a total of 820 CBOCs, and the number of mobile outpatient clinics and Mobile Vet Centers, serving rural Veterans, has increased by 21, to the current level of 79.

While opening new and improved facilities is essential for VA to provide world-class healthcare to Veterans, so too is enhancing the use of ground breaking new technologies to reach other Veterans. VA continues to invest in "bringing care to the Veteran" - through expanded access to telehealth, sending Mobile Vet Centers to reach Veterans in rural areas, and by deploying social media to share information Veterans on the VA benefits they have earned.

VA is using innovative telehealth primary care services to overcome geographic access barriers and improve the efficiency of care to rural areas. In fiscal year (FY) 2013, VHA provided more than 1.7 million episodes of care to 608,900 Veterans through telehealth services linking 151 VAMCs and 650 CBOCs, as well as by connecting via telehealth with 146,804 Veterans in their own homes, of which 2,284 were via video. The scope of VA's telemental health services includes all mental health conditions with a focus on posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, bipolar disorder, behavioral pain, and evidence-based psychotherapy.

VHA is aggressively working to increase Veterans' access to high quality care. While we are progressing in delivering timely care to our Veterans and improving the reliability of reporting wait time information, VA is committed to honoring America's Veterans and there are a number of ongoing and future actions to improve wait times:

- No measure of wait times is perfect. However, with evidence from VHA's 2012 wait time study, ongoing VHA performance measures, as well as findings and recommendations from others, VHA's action plan is designed to ensure the integrity of wait time measurement data collected from our access points of care;
- VHA is constantly evaluating access and scheduling policies and technologies, and aggressively monitors reliability through oversight and audits;
- We have implemented much of this plan, and we are working to implement the remainder of the plan in the next 12 months. VHA has also instituted site visits to audit patient access to care using the electronic wait list.

Today, Veterans experience primary care at VA differently than they did five years ago. VA's Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT), the model for more personalized and team based primary care delivery, is improving both access to healthcare and Veteran satisfaction. Patients are assigned a PACT team that to help coordinate and personalize their care.

Since its inception in 2010, the PACT program has transformed the way Veterans receive their care by offering a coordinated team approach squarely focused on Veterans' wellness and disease prevention. PACTs provide the right combination of healthcare professionals to develop personalized health plans for Veterans and conveniently deliver care at primary care clinics with a goal of personalized, proactive and patient-driven care. Veterans are also communicating with healthcare professionals through secure electronic means with increasing frequency as services are available. Despite the increase of primary care patients, access to primary care has improved and continuity of care is better. Veteran access to primary care during extended, non-business hours has increased 75 percent since January 2013.

### **Improving Access to Mental Health Services**

After numerous military operations over almost 13 years, the state of Servicemembers' and Veterans' mental health is a national priority. Meeting the individual mental health needs of Veterans is more than a system of comprehensive treatments and services; it is a philosophy of ensuring that Veterans receive the best mental healthcare possible, while focusing on the overall well-being of each Veteran. VA remains committed to doing all we can to meet this challenge.

Through the strong leadership of the President and the support of Congress, Veterans' access to mental healthcare has significantly improved. Since 2006, the number of Veterans receiving specialized mental health treatment has risen from 927,000 to more than 1.3 million in 2013. Vet Centers are another avenue for mental healthcare access, providing services to 195,913 Veterans and their families in 2013.

Since March 2012, VA has added over 2,000 Mental Health professionals – exceeding requirements in the President's August 31, 2012 Executive Order to improve access to mental healthcare for Veterans, Servicemembers, and military families. VA

has also hired 915 peer specialists, exceeding the goal of 800, to augment the work of those clinicians.

We proactively screen all Veterans for PTSD, depression, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse, and military sexual trauma to identify issues early and provide treatments and intervention opportunities. We know that when we diagnose and treat people, they get better

VA is a pioneer in mental health research and high-quality, evidence-based treatments. We strive to maintain and improve the mental health and well-being of today's Veterans through excellence in healthcare, social services, education, and research. In the last three years, VA has devoted additional people, programs, and resources toward mental health services to serve the growing number of Veterans seeking mental healthcare.

We are developing new measures to gauge mental healthcare effectiveness, including timeliness, patient satisfaction, capacity, and availability of evidence-based therapies. We are working with the National Academy of Sciences to develop and implement measures and corresponding guidelines to improve the quality of mental healthcare. To help VA clinicians better manage Veteran patients' mental health needs, VA is developing innovative electronic tools. Clinical reminders give clinicians timely information about patient health maintenance schedules, and the High-Risk Mental Health National Reminder and Flag system allows VA clinicians to flag patients who are at-risk for suicide. When an at-risk patient does not keep an appointment, clinical reminders prompt the clinician to follow up with the Veteran.

Since its inception in 2007, the VA's Veterans' Crisis Line (1-800-273-TALK (8255), press 1) in Canandaigua, New York, answered nearly 1,000,000 calls and responded to more than 143,000 texts and chat sessions from Veterans in need. The Veterans' Crisis line provides 24/7 crisis intervention services and personalized contact between VA staff, peers, and at-risk Veterans, which may be the difference between life and death.

In the most serious calls, approximately 35,000 men and women have been rescued from a suicide in progress because of our intervention - the rough equivalent of two Army divisions. VA offers expanded access to mental health services with longer clinic hours, telemental health capability to deliver services, and standards that mandate rapid access to mental health services.

### **Ending Veteran Homelessness**

VA is committed to ending Veteran homelessness in 2015. No one who has served our country should ever go without a safe, stable place to call home. VA's programs provide individualized, comprehensive care to Veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Veterans' homelessness fell by 24 percent between 2010 and 2013, and we expect another reduction when this year's point-in-time counts released. Last year, VA helped more than 42,000 Veterans find permanent housing

and awarded about \$300 million in grants to our community partners for supportive services for Veteran families. Nearly 260,000 Veterans and family members were served through VA's specialized homeless programs in FY 2013.

### **Other Healthcare Accomplishments**

President Obama signed the "Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010," into law which helps our most seriously injured post-9/11 Veterans and their family caregivers with a monthly stipend, access to health insurance, mental health services and counseling, and comprehensive VA caregiver training. To date, more than 16,800 caregivers have been trained to care for our most seriously injured post-9/11 Veterans. VA also has a Caregiver Support Coordinator stationed at every VA medical center, as well as a national Caregiver Support Line (1-800-260-3274) and Web site ([www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov)) to provide support and resources to Caregivers of Veterans from all eras.

VA initiated a multi-faceted approach to reduce the use of opioids among America's Veterans using VA healthcare, seeking to reduce harm from unsafe medications and/or excessive doses while adequately controlling Veterans' pain. To achieve this, VHA has established nine goals for safe, evidence-based, Veteran-centric pain care as part of VHA's Opioid Safety Initiative (OSI). Launched in October 2013, in Minneapolis, OSI is already successful in lowering dependency on these drugs. At eight sites of care in Minnesota, OSI practices have decreased high-dose opioid use by more than 50 percent.

OSI places an emphasis on patient education, close patient monitoring with frequent feedback, and Complementary and Alternative Medicine practices like acupuncture. These joint pain management guidelines encourage the use of other medications and therapies in lieu of habit forming opiates. OSI is an example of VHA's personalized, proactive and patient-centered approach to healthcare through an innovative and comprehensive plan that monitors dispensing practices system-wide, includes patient and provider education, testing and tapering programs, and alternative therapies like behavior therapy.

### **Summary**

These accomplishments are the results of VA's focus over the past five years – during which time we have worked to increase Veterans' access to high quality healthcare, education and training, and employment opportunities in both the public and private sectors. There is always more work to do, and VA is focused on continuous improvement to the care we provide to our Nation's Veterans.

I appreciate the hard work and dedication of VA employees, our partners from Veterans Service Organizations—important advocates for Veterans and their families—our community stakeholders, and our dedicated VA volunteers. I also respect the important role Congress and the dedicated members of this committee play in serving

our Veterans, and I look forward to continuing our work with Congress to better serve them all. Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your unwavering support of those who have served this great Nation in uniform.