

STATEMENT OF SUSAN WILLIAMS, VETERAN

Ms. Williams. Good evening, Senator. Thank you for letting me talk tonight.

I am 100 percent disabled veteran. I have been in the VA system for 20 years. I am also a registered nurse for over 30 years, and I visited probably in my travels about 20 different VAs. I must say that Anchorage is one of the better VAs that I have ever been to. I have never had to wait for care. I have always gotten referrals and everything as I needed them.

I am extremely upset and disappointed about the service that I have been getting ever since this new Choice system came into being. I liked the idea of being able to choose the doctor or the place, but I do not think I have even been able to do that.

I am mostly going to give you some examples of what I have run into and issues I have had.

There was a radiology appointment made for me. And one of my biggest issues with TriWest is that they will not let you make your own appointment. They have to make it for you. They do not know our schedules, so how can they even do that? But anyway, they made me an appointment with radiology, and I told them that I could not go to that appointment. I was having a lot of problems walking. As soon as I was better, I would call and tell them to schedule the appointment. The lady I talked to

said fine, no problems.

The next day, a lady called me from TriWest, very rude, and said that was not acceptable. She would make me the appointment and this was my last chance to go if I wanted the appointment.

I had bilateral knee replacements on May 27. The doctor sent all the paperwork they needed to the VA. While I was in the hospital 2 days after surgery, and also very high on dilaudid, the nurse manager came in and was unable to get me home care for the first 2 weeks before the physical therapy.

I had to call the Choice program, tell them what I wanted, and then gave her the phone and said, look, I cannot talk to you. I am not in a talking condition, so you need to work with this lady to get me my home care. Well, I did finally receive my home care.

So at the same time, we set up an appointment for physical therapy, which I should have started on June 15. When June 15 rolled around, there was no authorization for physical therapy. I called numerous places. I called the VA. I called Choice numerous times. It actually took them 6 weeks to get my physical therapy approved.

As a medical professional, I cannot overstate the importance of physical therapy. With physical therapy, it is critical that you start physical therapy immediately. You can have need for additional surgery, you can get muscle

contractures. You could have to be put back under sedation and have those contractures straightened out. You can have loss of joint functions. You can have an increased recovery time, which is my problem now. There are numerous things that happen when you do not get it. You can end up in a wheelchair.

So I finally went to PT. One of the PT persons I knew as a medical professional said to come in and let me work with you and we will ask the VA to authorize it back to the State. So I went in and went to a few appointments with him. They contacted the VA and got it approved, an authorization for me to go to physical therapy, and they would pay back to June 15. However, I just got a letter in the mail saying that they are not going to pay back to June 15.

So I have a letter that says they are and a letter that says they are not. So it is kind of, to me, the right hand does not know what the left hand is even doing.

Anyway, I kept calling Choice throughout this 6 weeks and trying to explain how important it was. They tried to blame it on the VA and say, well, they take a long time to go through Integrated Care. I am like, no, I have never waited more than a week before. Then they said it is in our contract. We have to wait 7 to 10 days before we can contact you about an appointment.

If you have a heart attack or if you have heart problems,

diabetic problems, if you have ulcers or anything, those 30 days can cost you your life. If a diabetic has a toe ulcer, if it turns into gangrene, and that gangrene turns into sepsis, you are gone. You know, there is no reason why people should have to wait.

While I was trying to get my physical therapy approved, I did get one call from TriWest, stating that I was now authorized to go in and see a doctor to have my surgery. So that was a little late.

I tried to change the place I went to physical therapy from Anchorage over to Eagle River, because I live here, and I had a lot of issues with that. First, they did not want to change me. Then I had appointments at two places. Then I get a call from one company saying, "Where were you? You had an appointment here today."

TriWest has done this to me numerous times, never let me know I had an appointment, never let me know they scheduled me for an appointment. And I get calls from these offices saying, "Where are you? Why aren't you here?"

So now I am authorized for two different physical therapists in Eagle River.

Being a medical professional, I knew what would happen if I did not get the physical therapy. And I want to speak for the layperson who has no knowledge of this. They are being pushed

off from physical therapy. And again, it is dangerous to their life, to the way they live. There are all kinds of complications that can come from not doing this.

Another example, I have been seeing a chiropractor for 2 years. I asked for an extension on that, which was approved. I received a call from another chiropractor I have never heard of saying, "Where were you? You had an appointment here."

There is no continuum of care. They want you going to this place, then this place, then this place. The continuum is gone.

Like I said before, heart patients, if they need a stress test, that could mean their death. Diabetic patients, neuro patients, if they have a small image in an x-ray and need an MRI, 30 days, that could be very large and inoperable by then.

But they insist that you have to wait 7 to 10 days, just until they get the paperwork. It ends up being about 6 weeks.

In the VA, I deal with a small number of people and those people are very caring. This is, like I said, one of the best VAs I have been to. Integrated Care, which I use frequently, has always gotten me an appointment within a week. When I have an out-of-state appointment, they are right there taking care of everything for me.

I had an appointment with my urologist in the middle of the month. I called Choice in the middle of July and told them the time of the appointment. I still have not heard anything from

them, so I missed the appointment.

TriWest has already showed me that they can lead you in the wrong direction. They tell you mistruths. A lot of the people I have talked to are rude and just hang up on you.

In conclusion, of all the doctor offices and stuff I have talked to here, no one has had anything good to say about Choice. I would love to be exempt from this and go back to the way we were, because it was a good system. We got the care that we needed. That is all I have to say.