

Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Hearing
VA MISSION Act: Assessing Progress Implementing Title I

Opening Statement of Chairman Jerry Moran
Wednesday, October 21, 2020

(As Prepared for Delivery)

“Good morning, everyone. The committee will come to order.

“The focus of today’s hearing is the implementation of Title I under the MISSION Act by the Department of Veterans Affairs, relating to the Veterans Community Care Program and the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.

“I scheduled this hearing because of my dissatisfaction with the pace of MISSION implementation. While VA officials were invited to participate in today’s hearing to discuss these critical programs they oversee, the Department chose to decline our invitation.

“This committee and the VA shared the common goal to pass the MISSION Act in 2018 to better serve veterans and their families, and we continue to work together to address important issues for our nation’s veterans. I would expect them to be here for this conversation, to share all they have accomplished since the VA was transformed with this legislation and to discuss what needs to be improved. The VA is an integral part of this dialogue which is why I plan to schedule a subsequent hearing with VA officials to discuss Title I implementation.

“I would be remiss to not recognize the unprecedented challenges of this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The dedicated staff on the VA’s frontlines deserve both our thanks and recognition for their essential role in caring for veterans and in fulfilling VA’s Fourth Mission. However, at a time when accessing health care is of the utmost importance, the VA has struggled to uphold the MISSION Act’s requirement of providing veterans access to community care. My staff and I continue to hear complaints from veterans and providers related to poor communication, lapses in continuity of care, and network inadequacies.

“Third Party Administrators – like TriWest and Optum here with us today – are valued and essential partners in the delivery of care to veterans through the Community Care Network. They play an important role in building a robust and resilient Community Care Network that is able to provide veterans timely access to care and make certain community providers receive prompt payment for the care and services they provide.

“When the VA released stringent access standards for community care, I was encouraged to see more veterans would finally be able to access timely, quality care closer to home. However, my staff and I have since learned that VA’s contracts with Third Party Administrators use a completely different set of standards to determine how veterans access care. Under the contract terms, rural and highly rural veterans could be forced to drive up to 3 hours for care—which is completely unacceptable and contradicts the spirit of MISSION. I’ve discussed this inconsistency with VA officials but despite VA’s assurances publicly and privately, it is uncertain whether the VA has modified the terms. We hope to learn more today.

“The Community Care Network is central to the MISSION Act’s aim to transform VA health care into an innovative and responsive 21st-century health care system capable of addressing the challenges veterans face today and providing access to the care veterans deserve under this law. As such, I want to ensure that MISSION Act success and utilization of the Community Care Network is accurately accounted for because there are sufficient numbers of local providers in the network for veterans to utilize.

“Much has changed in our country since this committee held a hearing on the implementation of the Community Care Network earlier this year, but the intent and goal of the MISSION Act has not. We remain committed to making certain that veterans who qualify for care in the community are able to get that care, without unnecessary

scheduling delays, through a mature and geographically-dispersed network of community providers that upholds VA's access standards, and that those providers are paid in timely manner.

“Congress has the responsibility to oversee the VA's execution of the laws that govern the agency's responsibility to serve veterans – and we take this responsibility seriously. I believe some of the VA's most senior leaders might agree with me that while progress may be underway, it must move faster to enable the Community Care Network to serve veterans as we all envisioned. I want to know how the VA is making progress in working with their Third Party Administrators to transform the VA and offer veterans access to the health care they deserve.

“Another essential component of the MISSION Act is the expansion of eligibility for the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to all generations of veterans. Many caregivers have been providing essential services for their loved ones without this support for years, and in some cases, decades.

“As veteran caregivers are often the main caretakers for their loved ones, many can experience depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions attributed in part or solely to their experience of caregiving. The stress associated with caring for a spouse or family members with complex health care needs is a real and present concern for veteran caregivers. It is essential that in VA's support for caregivers, these mental health challenges be addressed effectively.

“MISSION outlined a two-phase process to expand these supportive resources with an anticipated start date of October 1, 2018 for Phase I. Phase I implementation only just began on October 1 of this year, two years behind schedule. This delayed rollout will result in caregivers needing to wait even longer to be part of this vital support program.

“I look forward to hearing the testimony from everyone who will be taking part in today's hearing about issues that you face in your work to help care for and serve veterans, and steps the VA can take to make certain both of these important programs are functional and able to deliver good results and outcomes for veterans and caregivers.”