

**STATEMENT OF
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VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE
FIELD HEARING IN EAGLE RIVER, ALASKA**

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Good Afternoon Senator Sullivan. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you to discuss Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and benefits for Alaska Veterans, and their families. With me today at the witness table is Dr. Thomas Lynch, Assistant Deputy Under Secretary for Health Clinical Operations. I'm also accompanied by Larry Carroll, Director of VA's Northwest Network, and Dr. Linda Boyle, Acting Director of the Alaska VA Healthcare System.

Today, I will briefly review the current facilities and services of the Alaska VA Healthcare System (AVAHS) which will also include information about enrolled Veterans and current users, tele-health and training initiatives, agreements with Federal and Tribal healthcare systems, the Veterans Choice Program and the delivery of non-medical benefits and services.

Alaska VA Healthcare System Facilities and Services

The Alaska VA Healthcare System provides health care to eligible Alaska Veterans through an integrated delivery system that includes VA clinical care sites and care provided through a VA-DoD Health Care Resources Sharing Agreement and 26 Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreements with Alaska Tribal Health Programs. The Alaska VA Healthcare System's Joint Commission-accredited facilities serve Veterans throughout Alaska. The parent facility is located in Anchorage, Alaska and is attached to the 673d Medical Group (MDG), Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER) via a connecting corridor. There are three VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), which are located in Fairbanks (358 miles north of Anchorage), Kenai (158 miles south

of Anchorage), and Wasilla (Mat-Su) (41 miles north of Anchorage). The Fairbanks VA CBOC is located in the Bassett Army Community Hospital under a VA-DoD Health Care Resources Sharing Agreement. In addition, there are two VA Outreach Clinics. One is located in Homer and is an extension of the Kenai CBOC. The Homer clinic serves Veterans twice a week at the South Peninsula Hospital under a contract for space and ancillary services. The second is located in Juneau (569 miles from Anchorage). The Juneau VA Outreach Clinic operates under a lease in the Juneau Federal Building, leveraging efficiencies of space and operations with the U.S. Coast Guard. The cities of Anchorage, Fairbanks, Wasilla, and Soldotna are also home to VA Readjustment Counseling Centers, or Vet Centers, which provide counseling, psychosocial support, and outreach to Veterans and their families.

AVAHS provides or contracts for a comprehensive array of health care services. It directly provides primary care, including preventive services and health screenings, and mental health services at all locations. Inpatient care is provided at JBER as well as through contracts with community medical facilities. AVAHS provides specialty care in General Surgery, Podiatry, Orthopedics, Cardiology, and Optometry. Urology and Ophthalmology are provided at JBER. The Anchorage facility also has a Dental Clinic, Physical Therapy and Occupational Therapy clinic and an Audiology Clinic. Audiologists travel to VA CBOCs and Coast Guard clinics in Southeast Alaska to provide care to Veterans. The audiologists have also traveled to rural areas of Alaska, such as Bethel, Unalaska and Metlakatla, to provide direct patient care. AVAHS also has an active Home-Based Primary Care program serving 89 Veterans in their homes within a 20-mile radius of the Anchorage facility.

AVAHS also offers a comprehensive continuum of care for homeless Veterans. Inpatient mental health services are provided through contracts with community psychiatric facilities and hospitals, as well as specialized programs at VA facilities in the Lower 48. Additionally, AVAHS has a 50-bed domiciliary located in midtown Anchorage. There is a Fisher House located on Air Force property that serves eligible service members and Veterans. AVAHS

contracts for nursing home care and other non-institutional care programs which include adult day care, respite, hospice, homemaker/home health aide, and skilled nursing.

Enrolled Veterans/Current Users

As of Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, there are 73,276 Veterans residing in Alaska (*VSSC Enrollment and Vet Pop Projections Report*). With dedicated outreach efforts by AVAHS, enrollees increased from 22,000 in FY 2002 to 32,104 as of August 2015 (*VSSC Current Enrollment Cube*), a 45.9% increase; 44% of Alaska Veterans are now enrolled in VA Health Care. In the same time period, Veteran users of VA health care benefits have increased from 12,262 in FY 2002 to 18,741, a 52.8% increase. Over 88 percent of enrolled Alaska Veterans live in a borough with a VA clinical presence. With the addition of care provided through 26 Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreements with Alaska Tribal Health Programs. Alaska Veterans enjoy excellent geographic access to VA or VA-authorized care. While there has been progress, we know that there are still opportunities to increase access and utilization as indicated by the following chart.

	Vet Pop	Enrollees	Users
(02013) Aleutians East, AK	151	32	13
(02016) Aleutians West, AK	345	49	16
(02020) Anchorage, AK	30,155	14,984	8,974
(02050) Bethel, AK	994	310	93
(02060) Bristol Bay, AK	114	32	16
(02068) Denali, AK	233	84	41
(02070) Dillingham, AK	295	99	38
(02090) Fairbanks North Star, AK	12,664	4,662	2,680
(02100) Haines, AK	282	90	45
(02105) Hoonah-Angoon, AK	197	83	39
(02110) Juneau, AK	2,256	928	469
(02122) Kenai Peninsula, AK	5,522	2,592	1,736
(02130) Ketchikan Gateway, AK	1,457	388	170
(02150) Kodiak Island, AK	1,363	386	186
(02164) Lake and Peninsula, AK	117	40	13
(02170) Matanuska-Susitna, AK	10,886	5,209	3,257
(02180) Nome, AK	671	126	35
(02185) North Slope, AK	346	85	33
(02188) Northwest Arctic, AK	459	92	21
(02195) Petersburg, AK	402	106	46
(02198) Prince of Wales-Hyder, AK	541	209	103
(02220) Sitka, AK	786	242	110
(02230) Skagway, AK	85	24	13
(02240) Southeast Fairbanks, AK	747	446	233
(02261) Valdez-Cordova, AK	1,076	376	199
(02270) Wade Hampton, AK	278	107	26
(02275) Wrangell, AK	266	114	48
(02282) Yakutat, AK	78	17	7
(02290) Yukon-Koyukuk, AK	510	192	81
	73,276	32,104	18,741

Mat-Su VA CBOC

On July 7, 2015, VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) released its report, "Healthcare Inspection: Scheduling, Staffing, and Quality of Care Concerns at the Alaska VA Healthcare System Anchorage, Alaska." The investigation was conducted to assess the merit of allegations regarding provider availability, workload, access, quality of care and security, and scheduling practices.

The investigation substantiated that Mat-Su CBOC had a period of inadequate staffing, which resulted in poor access to care for some patients, which in turn resulted in poor quality of care. The investigation did not substantiate the allegation of security issues at Mat-Su CBOC. The OIG found that there had been problems with scheduling practices in 2008, but there were none at the time of the investigation.

VA appreciates this review by the OIG and the opportunity to improve the service we provide to our Veterans. VHA is committed to correcting the issues in the report. Action plans have been implemented to address the recommendations, with all actions expected to be completed by December 31, 2015. AVAHS leadership remains committed to improving care for our Veterans in Alaska and will continue to keep Veterans and stakeholders informed of our progress as we work on improving service, access and overall quality of care.

Initiatives

Tele Behavioral Health – AVAHS, under the auspices of the Alaska Tribal Health Program (ATHP) Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreement with Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium in Sitka, AK, implemented a Tele-Behavioral Health project to provide one half-day per week treatment for Veterans with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This initiative, approved through the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Office of Rural Health provides treatment via telemedicine by a VA provider located in Anchorage to Veterans who are present at Mount Edgecumb Hospital in Sitka. Since its start on August 8, 2013, the clinic has added another half day of care for Sitka and is expanding to include three more Southeast Alaska communities.

The program will serve its first Veteran in Angoon by the end of FY15 and will begin serving Kake and Hoonah in FY16.

AVAHS has also initiated secure Clinical Video Telehealth into Veterans' homes. All AVAHS behavioral health providers have completed foundational training to expand secure Clinical Video Telehealth into the home. Four providers are actively providing this service to ten rural Veterans.

Telehealth – AVAHS makes active use of several telehealth modalities in order to offer services to Veterans. Alaska Telehealth services include: Teledermatology, Teleretinal Imaging, Tele Behavioral Health, Tele Renal Transplant Evaluation, Tele Amputation Evaluation, and Tele Medication Management. Group Telehealth services include: Tele Diabetes Education, Tele Nutrition Education, TeleMOVE!, and Tele Behavioral Health.

As of the third quarter FY15, over 2,300 Veterans have been served by AVAHS's Telehealth programs. New clinics, such as Tele Audiology and Tele Substance Use Disorder Group are being developed and will be operational in FY16.

Tele Primary Care –AVAHS initiated a pilot Tele Primary Care Clinic on June 27, 2013. A primary care nurse practitioner located in Denver, Colorado held clinic twice per week providing care to Veterans in Alaska. The pilot was successful, and now has grown to four primary care clinics supported by providers in Colorado, Florida, Idaho, and California. These clinics currently have capacity to serve 2,380 Veterans. In FY2016 the program will expand from the main Anchorage facility to community based outpatient clinics located at Mat-Su and Fairbanks. These clinics will be supported by providers located in Boise and Anchorage adding an additional capacity for 1,500 Veterans. This program is leveraging technology to meet provider shortages.

Rural Outreach Program – The Rural Outreach Program has continued to expand its outreach to rural communities with the support of funds from the VHA Office of Rural Health. Outreach has moved beyond the hub communities to the smaller villages,

which include, but are not limited to, Cold Bay, King Cove, Mentasta Lake, Tok, Fort Yukon, Beaver, and Stevens Village. VA staff have visited between 24 to 30 communities per year for the past three fiscal years. Community-wide enrollment and benefits-outreach events, known as Stand Downs, for Veterans in rural areas have occurred in Juneau in 2012, Dillingham in 2013, Bethel in 2014, Dutch Harbor/Unalaska Homer, Kotzebue, and Kenai in 2015, and will occur in Nome in September 2015.

Tribal Veteran Representative (TVR) Program – The TVR program uses local community volunteers to assist VA in reaching out to Alaska Native Veterans. A TVR is an Alaska Native Veteran or recognized individual appointed by an Alaska Native Health Organization, Tribal Government, Tribal Council, or other Tribal entity to act as a liaison with local VA staff. The TVR is a volunteer, unless paid by the Alaska Native entity who selects the individual to represent them. Collaborative training is provided by VA health care and benefits staff. To date, 13 TVR training sessions have been conducted. In 2015, training was conducted at Dutch Harbor, Homer, Kotzebue and Kenai, and will be conducted in conjunction with the Stand Down event in Nome. AVAHS has trained 250 TVRs from 40 Alaska communities to date. This effort will continue next year and beyond, dependent on funding and budget for the Rural Health office.

VA-DoD Health Care Resources Sharing Agreements and Direct Care Services

Reimbursement Agreements – AVAHS's VA-DOD Health Care Resources Sharing Agreement with the 673d MDG JBER provides for services to eligible Veterans and DoD beneficiaries. The Alaska VA Healthcare System also maintains a VA-DoD Health Care Resources Sharing Agreement with Bassett Army Community Hospital, Fort Wainwright. The Juneau clinic and the U.S. Coast Guard in Juneau, Alaska are able to assist each other due to their proximity in the Federal building. In addition, AVAHS and the 673d MDG have had successful Joint Incentive Funds (JIF) projects for Enhanced Outpatient Diagnostic Services to integrate VA demand for Computed Tomography (CT)/Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), establishment of a Sleep Lab, addition of a second MRI to increase access/capacity, establishment of a Pain Management Clinic,

and Cardiology Services Enhancement for 2013/2014. The quality and level of service enabled by VA's health care resources sharing agreement with the 673d MDG, led 673 MDG to win "Best Inpatient Facility Patient Safety Program in the Pacific Air Forces for Fiscal Year 2014," enhances and provides additional support for Alaska Veterans. In addition to the clinical JIF projects, the relationship results in significant efficiencies in the integrated warehouse and sterile processing departments. When VA determined to institute ISO 9001 standards into the Sterile Processing Service (SPS), the integrated SPS located at the 673d MDG also incorporated ISO 9001 standards into their processes. The jointly staffed Intensive Care Unit offers tremendous capacity to Veterans that would not otherwise be available. In addition, the Air Force Emergency Department (ED) functions as the ED of choice for Anchorage bowl Veterans.

Alaska Federal Health Care Partnership (AFHCP) – The AFHCP is a formal, voluntary, interagency relationship between DoD, Department of Homeland Security, Health and Human Services' Indian Health Service, VA, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, and Alaska Native Medical Center working together to share and provide efficient delivery of healthcare education to combined audiences, as well as sharing information, talents, and experiences to improve patient care for all Federal beneficiaries throughout the State of Alaska.

Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreements with ATHPs – In 2012, VA signed 26 Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreements with ATHPs to reimburse the ATHPs for direct care services they deliver to eligible Native and non-Native Veterans seen throughout Alaska. These are 5-year agreements, and have strengthened both VA and ATHP systems to increase access to care for Native and non-Native Veterans, particularly those in remote and rural areas served by ATHPs. The Alaska VA has purchased care for approximately 8,000 Veterans and paid over \$13,000,000 in care since signing the agreements. Care received by Veterans living in rural communities is steadily increasing. When shortfalls due to provider staffing occurred, Southcentral Foundation in Wasilla began providing primary care to over 1100 Veterans. There are over 600 Veterans receiving primary care at Chief Andrew Isaac Clinic in Fairbanks

Alaska, thereby providing access to care for Veterans living in areas where attracting providers has been challenging.

Veterans Choice Program – The Veterans Choice Program is helping VA to meet the demand for Veterans' healthcare in the short-term. VA's goal is always to provide Veterans with timely and high-quality care with the utmost dignity, respect, and excellence. For the Veteran who needs care today, VA's goal will always be to provide timely access to clinically appropriate care in every case possible. However, as we have shared with staff for the Senate and House Committees' on Veterans Affairs, users of the Veterans Choice Program have identified aspects of the law that are challenging. We are working diligently to address these challenges and to turn them into opportunities to improve VA care and services.

As of August 4, 2015, AVAHS had made 5,215 referrals for care through the Veterans Choice Program. Town Hall outreach sessions for community providers have been held in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Kenai, Fairbanks, Juneau and Ketchikan to explain the Veterans Choice Program and encourage provider participation in the Veterans Choice Program. Numerous one-on-one provider office visits have been conducted to assist individual office staff with signing on as Veterans Choice Program providers and with navigating the Veterans Choice Program. Town Hall outreach sessions for Veterans have also been held in Anchorage, Mat-Su, Kenai, Fairbanks, Juneau and Ketchikan to inform and assist Veterans with the Veterans Choice Program. AVAHS has grown their cadre of "Choice Champions" staff, specializing in the current information and processes of implementing the Veterans Choice Program, to include additional Anchorage VA staff and CBOC staff. This enables specific staff to develop and retain in-depth knowledge of the Veterans Choice Program to assist Veterans with specific concerns. Choice Champion staff has met with VA Alaska employees, engaging in information sharing and problem-solving regarding implementation of the Veterans Choice Program.

To summarize, AVAHS continues to work to increase access to Alaska Veterans. The most significant accomplishments in the past two years have been AVAHS's outreach to rural Alaska as well as the Direct Care Services Reimbursement Agreements with ATHPs. A continued priority is to reach Veterans statewide to increase enrollment and access to VA services closer to where the Veteran resides. This can be provided either directly, through tele-health by VA staff, or through contracts or other agreements with medical facilities already located in their home communities.

Veteran Benefits Administration

Approximately 80 percent of Anchorage Regional Office (RO) employees are Veterans themselves. 35 employees work in the Veterans Service Center (VSC), and eight work in Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E). The RO is currently onboarding two new Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to support the two counselors currently overseeing the VR&E Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) activities at Fort Wainwright and JBER.

Employees at the Anchorage RO are extremely motivated and provide excellent service to Alaska Veterans and their families; nonetheless, they fully understand there is more work to be done as we work to eliminate the claims backlog.

Conclusion

In conclusion, AVAHS has continued to improve access and services to meet the needs of Veterans. We are committed to ensuring the best possible service is provided to Veterans, their families, and surviving spouses. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.