

Ensure Timely Access to Care for U.S. Veterans

A U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) audit found that nearly 60,000 new patients nationwide waited up to three months for care. In Texas facilities, the average wait time for a new patient to get a primary care appointment ranged from 31 days in Amarillo to 85 in Harlingen and McAllen. “It was worse for specialty care patients at clinics in Harlingen and McAllen, where the wait was 145 days — the longest in the nation,” the *San Antonio Express-News* reported.

The VA system needs more doctors

The VA just doesn't have enough doctors to meet the demand for medical care. For decades, the U.S. Congress hasn't given the VA the money it needs to hire those doctors. With about 2.5 million vets returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the demand has grown even larger — further overloading the VA.

- President Obama must take immediate action to provide timely access to care for veterans using the health care sector outside of the VA system until the VA can provide that care itself in a timely fashion.
- Congress should examine the cost-effectiveness of existing health care services at the VA and setting up new services versus using private providers to make sure veterans are being seen and receiving these needed services in a timely manner.
- Congress should ensure that private providers are paid timely and appropriately when delivering needed health care services to our veterans.
- Congress must enact long-term solutions rapidly so eligible veterans can always have timely access to entitled care, and limit the bureaucracy that is creating difficulties in receiving this care.

From VA Access Audit, June 9, 2014

Facility	Primary Care Wait Time		Specialty Care Wait Time		Mental Health Wait Time	
	New Patient	Established Patient	New Patient	Established Patient	New Patient	Established Patient
Dallas	60.3	5.4	58.9	6.2	49.9	5.9
San Antonio	36.7	2.6	42.6	1.0	29.8	2.0
Temple	49.9	7.6	54.3	5.5	35.9	3.0
Valley	85.2	12.5	145.2	1.2	55.4	1.8
Houston	44.1	1.9	58.1	1.1	39.4	0.6
Amarillo	31.2	2.0	40.5	2.5	60.9	1.1
Big Spring	37.7	12.1	53.1	6.4	33.0	4.1
El Paso	35.1	1.7	89.6	4.7	60.1	16.0

Source: www.va.gov/health/Access_Audit_Data_Archive.asp

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At the urging of Texas physicians, the American Medical Association (AMA) voted overwhelmingly to ask President Obama to take immediate action to provide timely access to care for veterans using the health care sector outside of the VA system until the VA can provide that care itself in a timely fashion. AMA also urged Congress to enact long-term solutions rapidly so eligible veterans can always have timely access to entitled care.

Our veterans have stepped up and served our country, so physicians want to be able to step in and serve them. It is tragic that our veterans have been forced to wait for the health care they need and deserve, so Texas physicians and our colleagues across the nation want to help care for them until the VA can right the ship.

With the stroke of his pen, the president could issue an executive order establishing an emergency system where veterans could get the care they need from private doctors quickly and easily. Unfortunately, more than a month has gone by with no action by his administration and no response from the White House. Each passing day carries the real-life risk of death and worsening illness for the men and women who have served our country so bravely.

Too much bureaucracy prevents access to care

The VA health system is divided into regions across the country — and some of those regional lines don't make much sense. For instance, there is a VA clinic in West Texas in the town of Big Spring. It's set up to handle routine care for veterans. But to see a specialist, or to have serious surgery or to undergo any in-depth testing, the veteran has to go to Albuquerque, N.M. — 600 miles away. Even though it takes only a few hours to get to Dallas or Houston or San Antonio, the VA regional hospital for West Texas is in Albuquerque.

San Antonio, a city with a long and proud history of military service, is home to more than 150,000 veterans. More veterans live in Bexar County than just about any other county in the nation. However, there is no interaction between local doctors and those who work at the South Texas Veterans Health Care System and the Audie L. Murphy Memorial VA Hospital. Improved collaboration and coordination could certainly improve care for these veterans.

Doctors across Texas who have tried to contract to provide medical care with the VA find:

- The VA has a very large electronic health record system, but there's no way for someone outside the VA to get information into or out of that system. This means either the doctors have to wait for paper records to be printed and delivered, or they have to repeat tests and procedures whose results are buried under VA bureaucracy.
- Getting clearance or approval to conduct a test or perform a procedure on a veteran is a mysterious and time-consuming process. It can take days or weeks to get the request to the right person inside the VA and get an answer back. Without prior authorization approval, a physician will **not** be paid for any service (no matter if it is needed or not).
- Even something as simple as writing a prescription for medicine and having it filled is complicated. The VA allows veterans to use only a VA pharmacy, which can be miles away.
- Finally, getting paid for providing care for a veteran is maddeningly difficult. You have to fill out the right government forms and make sure they get to the right office, and pray that the local VA has enough money left in its budget to pay the bill ... and then wait for payment hoping that you crossed every "t" and dotted every "i" correctly.

Former VA Under Secretary for Health Kenneth Kizer, MD, says this is not a new set of problems and the VA knows those problems are making it hard for them to do business with private physicians.

"Many of these private providers are happy to take care of veterans," Dr. Kizer said in an interview this week with *Kaiser Health News*. "They feel an obligation, and they're willing to do it for whatever the payment amount is. But it's just getting it that is so difficult and frustrating for them."

