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Washington, DC 20515-1312

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January 25, 2024

The Honorable Denis R. McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

Following numerous conversations with my veteran constituents and an alarming January 13, 2024, article published in *The Southern Illinoisian*, it has been brought to my attention that veterans in the Southern Illinois region are experiencing unacceptably long call wait times at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities within the VA Marion Health Care System, including at both the Paducah VA Clinic and the Marion VA Medical Center.

My veteran constituents have reportedly experienced call wait times exceeding 30 minutes and upwards of over an hour. This experience was also independently confirmed by reporters from *The Southern Illinoisian*, who called both facilities and reported being “placed on hold for over 30 minutes before being connected to an operator.”¹ This is unacceptable, and I trust you share my frustration. Veterans in Southern Illinois – and around the country – should not be forced to sit on hold to get a simple answer to a question regarding their healthcare.

Further, I have reason to believe that these long call wait times would be in violation of the updated policies laid out in Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive 1090, “Telephone Access For Clinical Care” which states that, “It is Veterans Health Administration (VHA) policy that Veterans and other VHA patients receive telephone care for management of appointments, pharmacy, healthcare information, health care delivery, patient education and other concerns related to the clinical care being provided to the patient through the standardization of the Interactive Voice Response (IVR) system **in order to foster a positive patient experience and optimize utilization of available services to reduce wait times and delays in care.** All VHA entities are affected by this directive.”² Ensuring veterans are not enduring long call wait times – especially given this September 20, 2023 Department-wide directive – should be VHA’s top priority.

However, given the recent concerns brought to my attention by my veteran constituents, I request an immediate staff-level briefing on these issues that will include answers to the following questions:

¹ https://thesouthern.com/news/veterans-report-long-waits-to-talk-to-va/article_0686cad7-ad2c-514f-a810-c09816ab5ed3.html

² VHA Directive 1090 “TELEPHONE ACCESS FOR CLINICAL CARE”

- Why are average speed to answer (ASA) metrics in place when veterans are placed on hold for longer than 30 minutes despite them?
- What are VA's goals, time standards, and actual metrics for first call resolution?
- If the phone queue is particularly long, why can't VA's IVR system hold a veteran's place in line and call them back? As you know, this capability is standard for business call centers and would assuage veteran callers' frustration.
- Is the Department confident that VA staff are receiving proper training on how to answer calls in a timely manner?
- Are call metrics being reported selectively?
- Why are VA call metrics not posted publicly in an open and accessible location for the Marion VA Health Care System?
- Please provide a brief to my staff on the telephone metrics for the VA Marion Health Care System, information on what discrepancies or failures to meet VA policy have been found, and remediation measures.

I appreciate your cooperation in this matter, and I look forward to hearing VA's responses as to how it intends to remedy these call wait time concerns in a way that upholds veterans' confidence in your Department's ability to deliver them the level of care and service they have earned. I ask that you provide this briefing no later than **February 2, 2024**. Should you have any questions about this request, please don't hesitate to contact my office.

Sincerely,



Mike Bost
Member of Congress