

## **AVASW reacts to the President's Response to the Commission on Care final report: September 2, 2016**

It is with a collective sigh of relief, and tremendous pride, that the Association of VA Social Workers brings to you the recently released conclusion of many months of research, collaboration and advocacy conducted on behalf of the Veterans of this country and the dedicated VA Healthcare providers and staff who care for them. As you know, as the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act was enacted in 2014, the Commission on Care was formed. Consisting of 15 subject matter experts across the Military, Veterans and Community healthcare fields, this Commission was charged with the responsibility to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the current state of the VA healthcare delivery system with a specific focus on timely access. Their mission was to take the information gleaned from their research to propose an evidence-based strategic plan to improve healthcare to Veterans over the next 20 years. This evidence included review of internal and external investigations, research, and personal testimony from countless Veterans, Veterans advocacy groups, and professional organizations.

AVASW executive leadership, led by our Congressional Liaison, Jerry Satterwhite, monitored the reports from the Commission for several months with great concern for the future of VA Healthcare and our ability to continue to lead the nation in Veteran care. Already showing signs of being an epic failure, the Veterans Choice Program that had been hastily implemented to resolve issues with timely access to care in the VA system, was resulting in even more delays and fragmentation to care in the community. In 2015, initial reports coming from the Commission indicated that expanding this failed program and dismantling the VA Healthcare system as a direct provider of healthcare to Veterans were being considered.

Late in 2015, AVASW joined with the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders (AVAPL), NASW, APA and several other VA professional organizations to express our mutual concerns. In January, 2016, AVASW was invited to testify to the Commission to represent the concerns as they related to VA Social Work. LeAnn Bruce, recent past president and Jerry Satterwhite represented the association with a goal to increase awareness of, and appreciation for, the VA's strong commitment to treating the whole person as evidenced by the strong prevalence of social workers who were integrated across all of the VA systems of care. Having conducted a review of each of the Commissioner's biographies, it became evident that the social work perspective was not included in the make-up of the commission. We felt that it was imperative to inform this diverse group how vital our profession was to providing holistic, Veteran-centric care and to meet the vast needs of our Veterans and their families. These interdisciplinary presentations from social work, psychologists, psychiatrists, physicians, nurses and AFGE collectively emphasized that the model of interdisciplinary care available in the VA is unmatched in the private sector and must be preserved and expanded if we are to fulfill our mission to provide quality, Veteran-centric services to our patients. The [CoC Minutes 21JAN16](#) and [Full AVASW and Partner presentations 21JAN16](#) can be found on the Commission's website.

The [CoC Full Final Report](#) was submitted on June 30, 2016. The 300-page report proposed 18 recommendations. The Commission was thorough and the majority of the recommendations were supported by all of the commissioners, well-founded, and were already recognized by VA leadership. In some cases, measures to rectify these had already been initiated. However, a small number of unfounded conclusions were also included which not only lacked an evidentiary foundation, but

were even refuted by independent research. From early in the discussion process, even before the report was finalized, a few of the Commissioners were so strongly opposed to these recommendations that they abstained from signing the final document. See [Michael Blecker's Letter of Dissent](#). The controversial and concerning recommendations included the formation of an independent governing board over Veteran care, access, and operations and the creation of a community-based network of Veteran healthcare services which would push more Veterans into the community for their care. AVASW, again joined with AVAPL and 10 other organizations to publish a response challenging those specific recommendations due to the concern that these measures would further delay and fragment care to our Veterans. See the white paper [here](#). On September 1st, 2016, President Obama sent his response to the CoC final report in the form of a [letter to the House and the Senate leadership](#). In his letter, President Obama strongly conveyed his support for 15 of the 18 recommendations for transformation of the VA to improve access to care. He recognized and applauded the fact that many initiatives are well underway to address the identified concerns and that the VA has already made great strides to streamline and improve care. While the President also voiced his support for VA-Community partnerships, it was comforting to know that he considers it "critical that we preserve and continue to improve the VA healthcare system and ensure that the VA has the ability to serve Veterans." Citing the independent research ([RAND, 2016](#)) that indicates the "VA delivers care that is often better than that delivered in the private sector," the President urged Congress to enact the VA's plan for Community Consolidated Care, an alternative model to the CoC recommendations for community partnerships. He also recognized that the governance board recommended by the Commission would undermine the authority of the Secretary to carry out needed improvements and that competing agendas could debilitate the system. Finally, the President conveyed his support and optimism for the My VA initiatives which are poised to provide the framework needed for successful VA transformation.

These sentiments were echoed by our VA Secretary, Robert McDonald, who stated that "many of the recommendations are aligned with the MyVA initiatives" that have already been implemented. He vowed to "examine the report closely and respond in greater detail in the coming weeks" but specifically addressed the recommendations for community partnerships stating, "We know we can't complete the job without the help from our partners (including Congress, Veteran advocacy groups and Veterans themselves). Secretary McDonald reported that nearly 90% of Veterans surveyed say they are "satisfied or completely satisfied," but stated that "until all Veterans say they are satisfied, I won't be satisfied." He said that the VA would "ensure we are doing everything possible to faithfully serve those who have served this country." He urged Congress to act on the VA's proposal to consolidate the Community Care programs, reform the claims appeals process and to pass the bi-partisan Veterans First Act before they adjourn at the end of September. See full statement [here](#).

The AVASW executive leadership would like to express deep appreciation to the Commissioners who were very clearly dedicated to their daunting mission and who worked diligently for the past two years to examine the VA system from every angle in order to make informed recommendations for the improvement of care delivery to our Veterans. Untold hours of research, testimony and discussion went into their comprehensive report that will facilitate this historic transformation of VA Healthcare delivery. We appreciate that we had the opportunity to meet with the Commission to express our views and concerns in an open and respectful forum. AVASW supports the initiatives to work collaboratively with the community partners to serve our Veterans and their families. Taking care of Veterans is the responsibility of all of society and we must work together to succeed.

However, we believe it is imperative that these collaborative relationships be led by the VA who is the subject matter expert for the unique issues faced by our Veterans.

We admire and support Secretary McDonald, under whose leadership we already see the seeds of positive transformation beginning to take root. His genuine concern and commitment for Veterans is evident, not only in his words, but also his actions. We support his endeavors to improve the Veteran *and* the employee experience, to improve and streamline processes and to promote the quality of VA healthcare. We value his openness, his compassion, and his desire to lead the VA into a brighter future...a future that allows us to do what we do best – provide the highest quality care to those who have sacrificed so much for us.

We wish to express our deep gratitude and respect to President Obama for his objective review of the report, openness to hearing the concerns of the Veterans and groups who support them, and for his dedication to preserving and strengthening the VA healthcare system.

Finally, we would be remiss in our gratitude if we did not mention the dedication of our partners (too many to mention here, but a special thank you to AVAPL who continued to spearhead efforts to bring awareness to the issues), to our members and concerned supporters who helped to share this important information across the country, and for our Veterans and their families who have stood up for us so that we can continue to stand up for them.

In the next few weeks, our House and Senate leadership will be reviewing the recommendations from the Commission, along with the responses and proposals of the President and Secretary. We are at crossroads in VA history and your voice is needed! Call, write, text, email, tweet... do whatever you can to let your representatives, groups and leadership know that the time is now to support the VA's ability to fulfill our mission to "care for those who have borne the battle" ... our Veterans.

Supporting documents, links & additional reaction statements:

[Letter from the President -- Report of the VA Commission on Care](#)



[Letter from the President -- Report of the VA Commission...](#)  
TEXT OF A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT TO THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AND THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE  
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[Paralyzed Veterans of America Reacts to President Obama's Response to the Commission on Care Report.](#)

[Commission on Care Report Reignites VA "Choice" Debate – The Military Advantage Blog](#)

Full Commission on Care Final Report:

[https://commissiononcare.sites.usa.gov/files/2016/07/Commission-on-Care\\_Final-Report\\_063016\\_FOR-WEB.pdf](https://commissiononcare.sites.usa.gov/files/2016/07/Commission-on-Care_Final-Report_063016_FOR-WEB.pdf)

LeAnn E. Bruce, ABD, LCSW, MVF-CSW

*Our mission: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." Abe Lincoln (1864)*