

## **MESSAGE FROM THE Secretary: Response to the Commission on Care**

**Sept 1, 2016**

As you all know, on July 7, 2016, VA received the much anticipated Commission on Care Final Report. I want to thank the Commission for their hard work. After carefully considering each of the 18 recommendations outlined in the report, I sent my analysis of the recommendations to the President for his review.

Today, President Obama will send his final response to Congress. I stand firmly behind the President's final assessment of the Commission on Care's report, and I thank him for his leadership on Veterans issues and support for MyVA transformation.

Along with input from Congress, Veterans Service Organizations, and government partners, VA has thoroughly reviewed each and every recommendation to determine whether they were feasible and advisable within the scope of the law. The President and VA find 15 of the 18 recommendations in the Commission's report feasible and advisable, and we have already accomplished or have been working on 12 out of the 18 through our ongoing MyVA transformation over the past two years. The Department has already started implementing the Commission's recommendations that the President and VA found feasible and advisable.

Two years ago, the President charged me with transforming VA into the high-performing, Veteran-centric organization our Veterans deserve. It has been and continues to be the highest honor of my life to serve as Secretary of Veterans Affairs and to work alongside some of the most passionate and dedicated people in the country.

We have certainly had our fair share of challenges, but we've taken ownership of them and are making irrefutable progress in improving Veterans' health care and health outcomes.

This past March, VA set a new record for completed appointments: 5.3 million inside VA, 730,000 more than in March 2014. We also issued twice as many authorizations for care in the community than in March 2014. Clinical workload is up 11 percent in the past two years.

Nearly 97 percent of appointments are now completed within 30 days of the Veteran's preferred date; 22 percent are same-day appointments; average wait times are five days for primary care, six days for specialty care, and two days for mental health care.

Nearly 90 percent of Veterans now say they are "satisfied or completely satisfied" with the timeliness of their appointments.

I strongly support the Commission's intent that creating a high-performing, integrated health care system that encompasses both VA and private care is critical to serving the needs of veterans. In fact, VA has outlined our approach to achieve this same goal in our Plan to Consolidate Community Care, submitted to Congress in October 2015. This plan would provide

Veterans with the full spectrum of healthcare services and more choice without sacrificing VA's foundational health services on which many Veterans depend.

At the same time, it is critical that we preserve and continue to improve the VA health care system and ensure that VA fulfills its mission. Veteran Service Organizations, having decades of experience advocating for generations of our Nation's Veterans, have made it crystal clear that they believe VA is the best place for Veterans to receive care. Many VSOs fear that the Commission's vision would compromise VA's ability to provide specialized care for spinal cord injury, prosthetics, traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health needs, which the private sector is not as equipped to provide. We share their concern and therefore do not support any policies or legislation that will lead to privatization. Privatization is not transformational. It's more along the lines of dereliction of duty.

Though there are many productive recommendations in this report, VA strongly disagrees with the Commission on its proposed "board of directors" to oversee the Veterans Health Administration (VHA). Such a board is neither feasible nor advisable for both constitutional and practical reasons. Most problematically, this proposal would seem to establish VHA as an independent agency, which would frustrate ongoing efforts to improve the Veteran's experience by integrating Veterans health care and services across VA, making it more difficult for Veterans to receive the quality care where, when, and how they need it.

VA is already advised by our new MyVA Advisory Committee, which has been hard at work since March 2015 applying the members' extensive experience in customer service and organizational change to our transformational challenge. They are leaders in business, medicine, government, and in Veteran advocacy. Among them are eight Veterans like: Major General Joe Robles who after spending 30 years in the Army became President and CEO for USAA; Dr. Richard Carmona, a Special Forces Vietnam Veteran and the 17th Surgeon General of the United States; and Navy Veteran Dr. Connie Mariano, who was the first military woman to serve as White House Physician to the President, the first woman Director of the White House Medical Unit, and the first Filipino American in US History to become a Navy Rear Admiral. These are innovative, resourceful, respected leaders who are advising us on transformation. They know business. They know customer service. And, they know Veterans.

We agree with the Commission that many changes planned by MyVA, recommended by the Commission, and strongly supported by many Veterans Service Organizations will likely require significant resources and legislative remedies, which Congress has so far been reluctant to enact.

VA has aggressively pursued legislative changes and funding that would enable us to achieve this vision. Early in 2015, VA submitted to Congress the *Purchased Health Care Streamlining and Modernization Act*, parts of which have been incorporated into the Veterans First Act in the Senate.

Congress has yet to act on those proposals.

There are more than 100 legislative proposals for Veterans in the President's 2017 Budget. Many are vital to maintaining our ability to purchase non-VA care.

We need Congress to modernize and clarify our purchased care authorities, to streamline our community-care systems and programs, to enact legislation so we can better compete with the private sector for the best medical professionals, and to fully fund the President's 2017 Budget.

The Senate Appropriations Committee approved a budget nearly equal to the President's request, but the House has proposed a \$1.5 billion reduction. It is past time to put political expediency aside and put Veterans first.

So what does all of this mean for you? It means that together we will continue to develop innovative solutions to the challenges we face through the MyVA transformation and implement the recommendations we have concurred with. This report, for the most part, is a sign that we are on the right track, so keep up the great work!

I will continue to advocate for policies and legislation, to ensure that we are doing the right thing for Veterans and the right thing for taxpayers. I charge you, our frontline employees, to continue to build upon the progress we have made.

You are the heart and soul of this department. You can ensure that Veterans continue to come first.

Thank you for all of your hard work. It is truly a privilege to serve with you.