

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4704

January 29, 2020

Richard Stone, M.D.
Executive in Charge
Veterans Health Administration
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Stone:

I am deeply concerned by reports of staffing and facility issues at the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center in Spokane (Spokane VAMC). I am particularly troubled by the impact these issues will have on patient care, safety, and wait times for veterans during the upcoming rollout of the new electronic health record (EHR) system beginning in March. At a recent hearing with the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Technology Modernization, VA leadership testified that they were "very confident" the new EHR would be ready for the anticipated start date at Spokane VAMC on March 28, 2020. However, given the numerous issues at the facility, I am concerned that may not be the case. As with any transformation of this scale, I understand there might be a lapse in productivity while providers and staff adjust to the new system. However, I firmly believe we must ensure timely and adequate care is still delivered to our veterans.

For years, Spokane VAMC has been experiencing ongoing challenges and large-scale changes that impact patient care. In 2014 the medical center closed its 24-hour emergency room and began a transition to urgent care in its place, but the medical center has not yet been able to provide 24-hour urgent care services. While I understand that the start date for 24-hour services was delayed in order to first improve staffing and resource management, these changes have already limited veterans' access to care outside of normal business hours such as in emergencies or in situations in which they are unable to reach their primary care provider. The same issues affecting the 24-hour urgent care implementation will pose a significant challenge to veterans during the EHR rollout. In addition to the emergency room being downgraded, the staffing and space issues at Spokane VAMC will continue to impede veterans' access to primary care and could worsen during the EHR modernization.

In 2018, Spokane VAMC leadership announced the medical center was seeking additional space elsewhere in Spokane to offer much-needed primary care for veterans. Since then, there have been reports that appointments for patients at Spokane VAMC were limited or cancelled due to staffing and sterilization issues. The recent Veterans Affairs Inspector General's report brought to light the lack of timely access to primary care and the need for bolstered staffing in Sterile

Processing Services. In addition to primary care, patients faced limited admissions to the ICU, limited bed availability for the Acute Psychiatric Unit, and limited operations and dental procedures. I am troubled by the impact of these shortages on our veterans, especially if they result in longer wait times and forgone care. Veterans could also be pushed to seek care in the community, which is already saturated. VA leadership has said resources will be deployed to Spokane VAMC to address these staffing and facility issues as the EHR project start date nears, but my office has yet to receive a comprehensive plan.

I ask that you provide responses to the following questions:

1. How are you investing in staff recruitment to ensure the VAMC is sufficiently staffed and veterans do not experience a lag in care as a result of staff vacancies?
2. What steps are being taken to ensure staff morale is not negatively affected during the implementation of the new system? How are you investing in staff retention and training leading up to and after go-live?
3. What specific steps are being taken to address the infrastructure issues and lack of space at the medical center?
4. What plans have you developed to mitigate issues that already exist and those that may arise during the EHR modernization project at Spokane VAMC, including plans to ensure access to the ICU, psychiatric services, and dental care?
5. What partnerships are in place with local providers to support veterans' access to timely, quality care?
6. What steps are being taken to reach 24-hour urgent care capability?

We make a promise to our veterans to ensure they have the resources and support to live full, healthy lives. We must ensure they have access to quality care when and where they need it. Going forward, I urge you to request necessary resources for Spokane VAMC to effectively provide veterans access to care in a timely manner. VA should take the necessary time and resources to ensure the new EHR system, the Spokane VAMC facility, and its staff are prepared for a successful implementation, and delay the start date if necessary to ensure veterans are able to receive the highest quality care. I appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to continuing to work together to make certain we fulfill the promise to care for our veterans.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator