



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2016 – COL – 04



<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



Columbia Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our nation's promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As the daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country and in defense of our core values and freedoms. In return for their service, she believes that our country owes veterans a sacred debt of gratitude, which includes access to safe, quality, reliable medical care through our U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC), both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the high standard of care provided by the St. Louis VA Medical Center – John Cochran Division, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans reported positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persisted among veterans with the customer service they received at the Center and, to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a “secret shopper” program for veterans—formally named the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program—to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA with targeted, helpful feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences at the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans' organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this collaboration, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would be useful to the VA medical centers and act as an independent resource for veterans to make recommendations. The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical center personnel;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri; and
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Columbia region facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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May 31, 2016

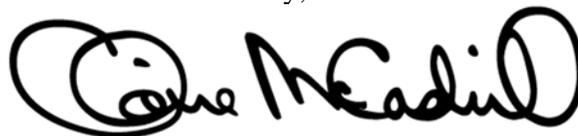
To the Director of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital,
Members of the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Columbia region. When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I meant it then, and I mean it now. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the strong satisfaction ratings of VA facilities in the Columbia region. In this fourth Summary Report, Missouri veterans, again, have given strong satisfaction ratings to the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital. However, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the number of responses received. Still, there is always room for improvement, particularly in the area of efficiency of care. Overall, the results confirm my belief that we are maintaining a high rate of veterans' confidence in the Truman VA.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to continue striving for improvements to ensure veterans have nothing but positive experiences while at Missouri VA medical centers. It appears that the leadership at the Columbia VA Medical Center recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support from my partners at the Columbia Region VA and several Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri's VA medical facilities, starting right here in the heart of our state.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

Kyle Klemp
Cindy Hall
Jason Rauch
Nick Rawls

Would you like your voice heard?

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:

<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the Columbia region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as Truman VA or VA) through the period ending April 4, 2016. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the Truman VA;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the Truman VA;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the Truman VA;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the Truman VA to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the Truman VA; and
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA and submitting other concerns identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans' service organizations reviewed the Summary Report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 21 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Claire's office, veteran leaders and the Truman VA worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA medical center regarding the quality of customer service.

Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the Columbia region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 4, 2016. In the Columbia region, two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys collected from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with and information received from representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their

customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, not including any identifying respondent information, were provided to the VA. In addition, all survey responses were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations. Specific comments were selected to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement offered or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

As of Summary Reports released in May 2015, survey questions and rating scales appear differently from previous reports. In earlier versions of the survey, veterans were posed questions with binary response options: "Yes" or "No." Beginning last year and going forward, survey questions and response options have been rewritten to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." Survey questions currently appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

Limitations

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted voluntarily by veterans. The comments included were obtained directly from the surveys. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 4, 2016. During this period, two hundred thirty-nine (239) survey responses were received in the Columbia region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty percent (60.9%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	3.4%
Korean War	4.6%
Vietnam War	60.9%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	20.6%
Iraq/Afghanistan	10.5%
Other	14.7%

Beginning with this survey period, respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Two hundred twenty-two (222) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	90.5%
Female	9.5%

In the survey, seventy-seven percent (77.0%) of the responses received to this question indicated that they had received services at the Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Harry S. Truman Memorial Veterans' Hospital	77.0%
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Fort Leonard Wood CBOC	4.2%
Jefferson City CBOC	5.0%
Kirksville CBOC	2.1%
Lake of the Ozarks CBOC	10.9%
Mexico CBOC	5.0%
Sedalia CBOC	4.2%
St. James CBOC	2.5%
Other	3.3%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Columbia region VA medical facilities. Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	31.1%	Emergency Room	5.9%	Extended Care	3.4%
Outpatient Clinic	21.8%	Mental Health Services	13.4%	Dental	4.2%
Pharmacy	8.8%	X-Ray	6.3%	Laboratory	22.7%
Travel/Enrollment	2.9%	Main Lobby	8.8%	Specialist Visit	19.3%
Inpatient Care	5.5%	Women’s Clinic	1.3%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	1.3%
Prosthetics	2.9%	Podiatry	8.4%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	2.5%
Other	19.3% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, Compensation and Pension Exam)				

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R4) are marked “current,” and results from previous surveys (R1 – R3) are also included. Beginning with the last Summary Report (R3), survey questions and rating scales appear differently from previous reports. In previous versions of the survey, veterans were posed

questions with binary response options: “Yes” or “No.” Going forward, survey questions and response options have been rewritten to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Survey questions now appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at a VA facility is still high for this round of surveys; however, concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			85.2%	82.9%
No:			14.8%	17.1%
Strongly Agree:	62.8%	56.0%		
Mostly Agree:	19.6%	23.3%		
Neutral:	6.3%	8.5%		
Mostly Disagree:	3.3%	4.5%		
Strongly Disagree:	8.1%	7.8%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 197 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to schedule their appointments at the Truman VA with ease. Of those Veterans who had an issue with scheduling their appointments, most commented on the fact that they cannot contact clinics directly. A few veterans noted that they were concerned with the amount of time that it took to see their doctor or receive their medications from the time they contacted the VA.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“After the phone tree, kept getting transferred & left voicemails, which were not answered. Had to make several phone calls before a date was set, same routine, & then phone tag, even though a day number was left, it was never called.”*
- *“I was able to schedule my Oncology appointment with no problem, but when I tried to schedule a Primary Care appointment I was told it would be 4 weeks or longer.”*
- *“I was able to get my appointment but if it had been longer than 3 months, I would have to wait. Old system where they could schedule up to a year in advance was better & every time you go to VA you get print out of appointments & if you need to change you can do it with plenty of time in advance.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to improve the automatic answering call-tree, with particular attention to user-friendly experience and ease of access to speaking directly with an appropriate person. Implement a reliable message-taking system, so that veterans can get the information they need quickly. Continue to ensure that veterans are able to successfully receive appointment

reminders. Consider printing pamphlets with providers' contact information and continue promoting awareness of the My HealthVet resource.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Concur. We continue to look for ways to make the telephone system work better for our customers. We are also evaluating expanding our Call Center Functions, which will be in line with the new national requirements. We know that maintaining full staffing in our Patient Call Center has a direct correlation to reducing many frustrations for our Veterans. Use of secure messaging in My HealthVet is a very effective means of communication, and we will continue to "market" this tool to more Veterans.

2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility

Most veterans continued to report that they were able to navigate the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region in order to find the location of their appointments.

I was able to find my way to my appointment easily.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			97.6%	97.6%
No:			2.4%	2.4%
Strongly Agree:	75.7%	73.5%		
Mostly Agree:	13.0%	13.0%		
Neutral:	6.3%	6.0%		
Mostly Disagree:	0.8%	2.3%		
Strongly Disagree:	4.2%	5.3%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 215 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the Truman VA. We continue to view this as a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help veterans navigate the VA facilities while renovations are underway at Harry S. Truman Memorial Hospital, and that improvements in wayfinding throughout the hospital are working.

Although the vast majority of veterans were able to reach their appointment site easily, the veterans who had difficulty finding their appointments indicated that their navigation was adversely impacted by the facility renovations in progress.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"The construction makes it a little confusing, but I know it is necessary."*

- *“Construction at the VA Columbia facility is expanding the parking lot, which happened to be my only inconvenience. Not a bad concession considering we need the extra parking areas.”*
- *“If I could not find my way, experience tells me everyone who works or volunteers at the VA would be more than helpful in showing you the way.”*

Recommendation: Continue present efforts to update all signage and make sure hospital staff and volunteers are able to help make visitors aware of any changes due to ongoing construction.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Our Wayfinding Project was completed this year and resulted in much improved signage. Besides our ongoing Ambassador Program in which employees volunteer one hour per pay period to assist with wayfinding in the main lobby, we continually reinforce the need for all employees to assist Veterans and visitors. The positive feedback we receive from Veterans supports the perception that our employees continue to do a very good job in this arena.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported a slight increase in cleanliness of the VA facilities in the Columbia region.

At the time of my visit, the VA facility was clean.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:			67.3%	51.2%
Above Average (Good):			22.3%	29.3%
Average/Fair:			8.4%	17.1%
Below Average:			0.4%	2.4%
Poor:			1.6%	0.0%
Strongly Agree:	74.5%	69.5%		
Mostly Agree:	17.6%	17.0%		
Neutral:	5.8%	7.0%		
Mostly Disagree:	0.8%	2.8%		
Strongly Disagree:	1.3%	3.8%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 220 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the Truman VA medical facilities were clean. Many veterans commented positively on the high level of cleanliness in the VA facilities. Any negative responses had to do with the conditions of certain restrooms.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The restrooms were a bit iffy. We were directed by an employee to the ‘cleanest bathroom’ on the main floor.”*

- *“The hospital floors were clean and mostly free of clutter except for ever present maintenance and custodian carts. The rest rooms were usually a bit messy but there is too few of them or not big enough for old men.”*
- *“Both facilities always immaculate. They put many civilian hospitals/clinics to shame.”*

Recommendation: Continue to have housekeeping monitor high-traffic areas for cleanliness, paying special attention to restrooms.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. Our housekeeping supervisors are aware of the need to be vigilant and consistent.

4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment

Wait times improved since the last survey period. The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time declined, while the percentage of veterans expressing that they were seen in a reasonable amount of time increased.

From the date I initially requested the appointment, I was able to be seen by my provider in a reasonable amount of time.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			85.3%	78.0%
No:			14.7%	22.0%
Strongly Agree:	62.8%	51.3%		
Mostly Agree:	13.4%	20.0%		
Neutral:	10.0%	12.8%		
Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	4.8%		
Strongly Disagree:	9.2%	11.3%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 182 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the Truman VA. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary, especially in Specialty Care appointments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I was able to get an appointment within 30 days. Considering the volume of patients seen at Harry S. Truman, that is good.”*
- *“Takes too long for almost any Specialty appointment.”*

- *“I have been trying to get an appointment with Pain Management for over 2 months and over 2 months waiting for a new appointment.”*

Recommendation: Continue filling vacancies in a timely manner to help reduce wait times and increase Truman VA’s capacities in critical areas.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. We have been very successful in recruiting new and replacement staff in the past year. Our significant reduction in non-VA care expenditures is attributable to hiring clinicians and support personnel so those clinical services can be provided in-house.

5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While some veterans are still having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the data continues to show improvement as a larger percentage of veterans reported positive communication exchanges. However, the data shows that more progress remains with regard to communication.

VA staff communicated well with me and clearly explained what was going on.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			88.5%	87.8%
No:			11.5%	12.2%
Strongly Agree:	67.4%	61.3%		
Mostly Agree:	15.5%	16.8%		
Neutral:	8.3%	7.0%		
Mostly Disagree:	3.7%	7.8%		
Strongly Disagree:	5.0%	7.3%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 198 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the Truman VA. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Many veterans referred to specific doctors or nurses with whom they had a particularly positive experience; however, veterans with concerns cited many different instances where communication could have been improved. Of those veterans expressing concerns, many stated that they were not satisfied with the depth of the answers they were provided by their doctor, or with the level of assistance connecting to outside providers.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I’m taking a medication for high cholesterol that is causing muscle pain. According to the blood tests, my cholesterol levels were in the normal range, yet my doctor wanted to increase the dose of the medication to twice what I had previously been taking, in spite of the side effects that I’m experiencing with the current dosage. When asked why, his response was ‘We automatically put patients in your age bracket on this dosage.’ That, to me, is an unacceptable answer.”*
- *“The doctors I have seen in the Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation and the rotating Resident doctors have been outstanding. Kind, understanding and a great bedside manner. Very pleased with their knowledge and their willingness to listen to my concerns!”*
- *“The people at the VA could not connect me to the proper nurse to talk to. I was transferred to 5 different people before I could get a simple answer about an outside provider of orthotic shoes!”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to make sure that VA doctors and employees at all levels are maintaining clear, consistent and accessible communication with patients. Continue to allow enough time to each patient to ask questions, and make sure that all questions are responded to in a thorough manner. If needed, adjust scheduling to allocate more time to each appointment so that neither veterans nor doctors feel rushed.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. We support the philosophy espoused above. In order to keep up with the increasing demand for health care services, our providers must be as efficient and thorough as possible.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. Accordingly, the data suggests that a strong majority of veterans were pleased with the VA’s healthcare efficiency.

I was able to get the care I needed during my visit.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	66.5%	61.5%		
Mostly Agree:	13.0%	14.3%		
Neutral:	6.3%	9.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	3.3%	6.0%		
Strongly Disagree:	10.9%	9.0%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 191 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Most of the concerns expressed by veterans related to the wait time in between completing a test/procedure and receiving the results, or the lack of communication regarding their situation with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Most of the visit was spent in ICU. I was allowed to stay with my husband all day every day to help with his care. Very attentive nurses answered every request for help.”*
- *“Counselor has been able to see the big picture, & make suggestions for change that have worked well, when they are used.”*
- *“X-Ray told the doctor they could not do the CT scan because they were shorthanded. Come back another day and they didn't care that I lived 4 hours away.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that all physician/staff interactions with patients during appointments include a willingness to listen patiently to veterans’ concerns regarding their care. Ensure that a patient’s time is being respected with effective communication when the decision has to be made to reschedule an appointment.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. Veteran or patient centered care principles reinforce the need for effective two-way communications between providers and patients.

7. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

The reported respect shown at Truman VA facilities remains high for this round of surveys. More than 88 percent of the responses received reported respectful interactions between veterans and staff at Truman VA facilities.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			89.6%	87.8%
No:			10.4%	12.2%
Strongly Agree:	75.7%	70.5%		
Mostly Agree:	13.0%	14.0%		
Neutral:	5.0%	9.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	1.3%	2.3%		
Strongly Disagree:	5.0%	4.0%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 212 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the Truman VA medical facilities. The data suggests that recent VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training may be working as intended. However, veterans continued to report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The check-in staff seemed to ignore me. This was a little frustrating since their clinic was not that busy. The rest of the staff was wonderful but the check-in staff was rude.”*
- *“The VA staff at Truman are very impressive with the respect they show all veterans. You can be in a suit and tie or look like you just crawled out of the gutter and they treat everyone with dignity and respect.”*
- *“There has only been one instance where I was treated disrespectfully in all the years I have been a patient at this facility. I issued a complaint about the incident and it was handled immediately.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts stressing improved patient/customer service through the “*I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics*.” Ensure that a mechanism continues to exist that allows patients to report any unsatisfactory incidents regarding a VA employee. Ensure that those staff members displaying *I CARE* values at all times are properly recognized, and administration is providing additional guidance for those who are shown to be lacking. Continue to ensure that all veterans feel comfortable communicating concerns about their care to Patient Advocates.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. In the past year, an additional employee recognition award for displaying I CARE core values was added so that additional staff members could be recognized. Upon the retirement of our previous Patient Advocate, management agreed to create and fill a second Patient Advocate position.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

Veterans continue to be inclined to positively recommend Columbia region VA facilities to other veterans. Since the last Summary Report, willingness to recommend Truman VA facilities has grown from 81.3% (R3) to 86.5% (R4).

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:			90.3%	82.1%
No:			9.7%	17.9%
Strongly Agree:	69.8%	63.3%		
Mostly Agree:	16.7%	18.0%		
Neutral:	5.0%	8.3%		
Mostly Disagree:	1.6%	4.0%		
Strongly Disagree:	6.7%	6.5%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this statement with 209 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the Columbia

region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted, primarily regarding patient care, wait times, and fractured care systems.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“The overall experience has been great. My doctor and staff are friendly, caring, and conscientious. The care and treatment I receive is on par, if not better than in the private sector.”*
- *“I enjoy the high-level of care I get. I'm not sent to residents, which happens a lot in the private sector. The quality of the staff is second to none. I would never want to go to any private-sector doctor.”*
- *“Beginning about 2013-14, the atmosphere and personnel had a distinct/significant improvement, for the better, in all services provided.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“The staff intend to do well, but all aren't as dedicated to patients as other places.”*
- *“It takes way too long to be seen. Was I supposed to lay on the couch for six weeks after surgery while I waited on the VA?”*
- *“I think that for me to have to either get on the road at 0500 hours to get to an appointment early or to spend 5 hours of my day on the road for medical assistance/advice is ridiculous...it takes too much time from other things I can be doing. Fix the issues of our Siloed Healthcare systems: I am a Military Retiree, eligible for Tricare, On Post Medical treatment at FLW, and VA. None of the agencies communicate with each other! We can do better!”*

Recommendation: Continue working toward providing better comprehensiveness of care for all patients at all levels of the VA system, and make it easier for healthcare to work in synergy with the rest of the veterans’ care needs.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

A veteran’s confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. Since the last report, veterans’ satisfaction with their physician or nurse has remained high. The data suggests that medical staff is making positive strides toward improving veterans’ health care experiences.

How would you rate your overall experience with your personal doctor or nurse?

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	65.7%	60.5%		
Above Average (Good):	18.5%	19.3%		
Average/Fair:	6.9%	11.5%		
Below Average:	2.1%	3.3%		
Poor:	6.7%	5.5%		

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this question with 201 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that their overall experience with their personal doctor or nurse was Excellent or Above Average. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and quality care. In contrast, veterans who expressed dissatisfaction with their personal doctor/nurse had several different reasons for their responses, including longer-than-expected wait times.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have used the St. James CBOC since it opened in 2002. The staff has been consistently professional, sincerely caring, and has met my every need with patience and prompt, effective treatment. As a retiree, I can use literally any medical facility I choose; yet, I use this facility because the care I receive from the doctors and nurses has been simply superb.”*
- *“My personal doctor only, he goes to the wall for me. It starts there and ends there. There are few people in Columbia who even follow the Hippocratic Oath. Mostly we’re treated and they are only there to protect their retirement because no one gets fired just moved from clinic to clinic.”*
- *“When I get in I have a good experience with them, but again it's getting in a timely time, three four or five weeks are way too long.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to recognize staff who demonstrate exceptional care when dealing with veterans. Ensure that improvements are being made to the length of time between provider cancellations and re-scheduled visits.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur. As mentioned previously, the I CARE awards have been implemented to recognize more staff members who deal effectively with Veterans. Our scheduling practices, procedures and performance are reviewed continuously at the local and national level.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

The reported overall experience with the Truman VA Medical Centers remained strong, but still showed an opportunity for improvement. Veterans’ concerns and recommendations were noted.

How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	55.3%	49.0%	54.0%	46.2%
Above Average (Good):	23.5%	24.0%	25.3%	15.4%
Average/Fair:	12.6%	14.5%	11.4%	23.1%
Below Average:	2.5%	6.8%	3.8%	7.7%
Poor:	6.3%	5.8%	5.5%	7.7%

Two hundred thirty-nine (239) responses were received to this question with 188 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was “Excellent” or “Above Average.” Twenty-one (21) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility as either “Below Average” or “Poor.”

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“If the cause for the long wait is a shortage of doctors, then recruit more or reduce the number of appointments. My time is valuable also.”*
- *“Sometimes it takes a long time to get an appointment for certain clinics. Some clinics are only open in late afternoon, which makes a long day.”*
- *“The care I get is on par with other hospitals. They may not have the amenities of private-sector hospitals, but the genuine concern and the caring they provide to me is priceless. Please help the VA stay in Columbia. This place saved my life 8 years ago.”*

Recommendation: Continue to monitor performance criteria the hospital already has in place to work toward greater improvement. Continue to implement and reinforce “I CARE” so that all veterans utilizing the Truman VA are respected, receive quality and timely care, and understand their options for getting questions answered and concerns addressed.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current Summary Report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans have made to improve the VA facility they visited. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Phone system is awful, hard to reach local clinic, If prescription has expired, it is almost impossible to get it renewed. Last time I had to drive to the clinic to get a prescription renewed.”*
- *“If a clinic puts in a request for physical therapy, you shouldn't have to be evaluated by the VA hospital in Columbia. They should trust the staff at the clinics and their recommendations.”*
- *“VA needs to relook the issuing regulations for a Veterans Identification Card. It should NOT be linked to receiving healthcare benefits as I am sure there are other veterans who are in categories 7 or 8 and do not qualify for VA healthcare. Yet, they should be able to be issued a Veteran ID Card, as we are still Veterans and receive other Veterans benefits.”*
- *“As a former Veterans Service Officer with the MO Veterans Commission, I have some unique insight into the VA healthcare system and its problems. It is my honest opinion that there are too many veterans whose medical problems have nothing to do with their service, but have managed to get enrolled in the system and are clogging it up for those who have bona fide service-connected conditions.”*
- *“Clinic staff should improve internal communications with doctor and follow up on urgent appointments more quickly.”*
- *“I know that the doctors and nurses are overworked, but they need to understand it is not easy for many of us to travel to Columbia for our appointments, so they need to have the information and make the appointment of value to the veteran and his health care.”*
- *“Provide evening / afterhours medical appointment options. Why must all appointments cease at 5 pm? Veterans deserve 24/7/365 care. Military personnel do not stop defending our country at 5 pm each day.”*
- *“With the exception of parking lot construction, the H.T. V.A. facility is top notch!”*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Which provider or department that does an excellent job do you want Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in the Columbia region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. One hundred eighty-four (184) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region.

Below are sample responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- *"The best department in the VA that I have dealt with is the Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation clinic. Wonderful experiences with them."*
- *"Dr. F is one of the best physicians I have ever been treated by. He is easy to like and I can tell he enjoys what he does. Also Dr. P at the Marshfield Clinic quickly helped me to get back on track after I was ganged up with multiple family crises all at the same time. She got me calmed down and has assured me she is a phone call to the clinic away."*
- *"Behavioral health team. Every interaction I have had with them has been incredibly positive. From the walk in triage to Dr. C to Dr. S, I could not ask for better providers."*
- *"At the VA Clinic, Osage Beach, MO. The receptionist is very nice and knows my name by sight. She goes above her duties. Thank you!"*
- *"I have had very positive dealings with outpatient surgery and the hearing dept. And I have to say that the many people that volunteer at the hospital do a wonderful job and are always so pleasant to deal with."*
- *"Blue Team, Primary Care, Dr. F and his nurse have been excellent when attending to my care and should be acknowledged for the above and beyond care that they give."*
- *"The phlebotomists/laboratory have been fantastic. There is usually no wait time to get you in and the people are very friendly and respectful."*
- *"The entire clinic did an excellent job helping me. I didn't meet anyone that didn't do their utmost providing service."*

Recommendation: The Truman VA Healthcare System deserves high praise for the many dedicated and compassionate professionals who care for our nation’s veterans. Continue to ensure that those employees who provide superior care and customer service are properly recognized and rewarded.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Concur.



FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "In FY 2015, Truman VA established a Veteran and Family Advisory Council that provides another formal feedback mechanism for the facility. The Council began meeting in April." What is the current status of this council, and have any findings been made?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Veteran and Family Advisory Council continued to evolve as a valuable feedback resource for new initiatives at Truman VA. The council meets every two months. In addition to the Veteran and Family Advisory Council, members have volunteered to serve on other medical center committees and task groups. This proactive initiative has allowed us to receive feedback in a timelier manner, because we are not waiting for reports of concerns, problems or compliments.

Ease of access to the appointment location at the VA facility

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "Truman VA will maintain its successful Ambassador Program and the Voluntary Service Program will continue to explore expanding its patient transport volunteer assignment to include helping Veterans get to their clinic appointments" in regard to recommendations to ensure veterans are able to easily access their appointments. Have you seen any improvements as a result of this expansion?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Ambassador Program continues to be a successful endeavor and has been supplemented during the past year by assignment of Veterans from the Compensated Work Therapy program to help with wayfinding at the main entrance.

Ease of scheduling appointments

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*We will continue to emphasize to Veterans that use of the Secure Messaging function within the MyHealthVet program can be of significant benefit for messages to and from providers including information about appointments.*" What has the Truman VA done to ensure that veterans are aware of this program, and what mechanisms exist to assist those with issues or questions with the online program?

VA Medical Center's Response:

A work station for the MyHealthVet program is located near the Information Desk in the main lobby. Its visibility and the assertive engagement of the staff member assigned enabled us to sign up more Veterans for the secure messaging function within MyHealthVet.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*Our institutional approach with regard to the role of the Patient Advocate is for concerns/complaints/questions to be handled at the earliest point of contact by any and all Truman VA employees throughout the organization.*" Although most veterans are expressing satisfaction with the quality of customer service received, what has the Truman VA done to ensure that the Patient Advocate has all of the necessary tools to serve the patients?

VA Medical Center's Response:

As mentioned previously, a second Patient Advocate position has been added. The replacement Patient Advocate is providing input for the job responsibilities for the second Patient Advocate position.



CONCLUSION

The Truman VA in the Columbia region continues its strong record of success providing veterans in Mid-Missouri high quality customer service. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' experiences at the Columbia region VA facilities.

Overall, feedback from Columbia region veterans was especially positive during this period. Veterans are expressing greater satisfaction with their overall experience at the Truman VA, and they are now more inclined to recommend the Truman VA to other veterans. However, it is clear from the surveys that there is always room to improve veterans' experiences at the Truman VA. The VA should continue to draw upon the advice it receives from its second Patient Advocate, as well as its Advisory Council in order to remain responsive to veterans' needs and concerns.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

Special thanks to the members of various veterans' service organizations who assisted in the development and completion of the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program: Robert Ross, Kimberly Tatham, Ken Jamison, James Plotts, and Michael Elmore.