



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 Medical Centers
Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2016 – VHSO – 01



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



Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks 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 clinics, 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 report positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran, concerns persist among veterans with the customer service they receive 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 first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Southwest Missouri facilities and includes a compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



Table of Contents	Page
Report	6
Scope & Methodology	7
Observation & Results	9
▪ Background	9
▪ Review of survey question results	10
1. Ease of scheduling appointments	10
2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the VA facility	12
3. Cleanliness of the VA facility	13
4. Amount of time to be seen by a provider	14
5. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility	15
6. Receiving necessary care while at the facility	16
7. Respect shown to veteran while at the VA facility	17
8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans	18
9. Overall experience with personal doctor/nurse	20
10. Overall experience at the VA facility	21
Veterans' Recommendations	23
Recognition of VA Employees	24
Conclusion	26

CLAIRE McCASKILL
MISSOURI

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 31, 2016

To the Director of the Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Southwest Missouri region. After reviewing the responses from this survey, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the Southwest Missouri region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks' ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

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. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum going that we have established over the last few years with the robust participation among our veterans. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

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 ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks 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 of the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and 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 VA medical facilities, starting right here in Southwest Missouri.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Lauren Dow
David Stokely
Cindy Hall
Nick Rawls
Jason Rauch

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 Southwest Missouri region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans visiting VA medical centers in other regions of the state were reviewed by Senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks (VHSO) through the period ending April 4, 2016. Comments 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 VHSO;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the VHSO;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the VHSO;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the VHSO to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the VHSO; 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, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders and VA Medical Center administrators 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 Southwest Missouri region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 4, 2016. In the Southwest Missouri region, one hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans completed the entire survey 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, Women Veterans of Southwest Missouri, Vietnam Veterans of America, Missouri State University Veteran Student Organization, 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 Senator McCaskill'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 completed surveys were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans' service organizations who selected specific comments to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the question. 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 question asked or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

Beginning with the current Summary Report, 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 scale spanning 1 through 5, where "5" indicated Strong Agreement and "1" indicated 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, one hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans completed a survey for the Southwest Missouri 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 (61.4%) 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	1.2%
Korean War	4.2%
Vietnam War	61.4%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	18.1%
Iraq/Afghanistan	12.7%
Other	14.5%

Beginning with this survey period, respondents were asked to indicate their gender. One hundred sixty-six (166) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	88.6%
Female	11.4%

In the survey, fifty-seven percent (57%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the Mount Vernon Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Fayetteville VA Medical Center	28.5%
Branson Clinic	24.8%

Mount Vernon Clinic	57.0%
Fort Smith, AR Clinic	0.0%
Ozark, AR Clinic	0.0%
Jay, OK Clinic	0.0%
Springfield Vet Center	0.0%
Other	4.8%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Fayetteville VA Medical Center. One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans reported using the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	33.1%	Emergency Room	2.4%	Extended Care	3.0%
Outpatient Clinic	24.1%	Mental Health Services	9.0%	Dental	5.4%
Pharmacy	12.0%	X-Ray	7.2%	Laboratory	35.5%
Travel/Enrollment	0.6%	Main Lobby	7.8%	Specialist Visit	8.4%
Inpatient Care	4.2%	Women’s Clinic	0.6%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.0%
Prosthetics	0.3%	Podiatry	3.0%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	0.0%
Other	33.1% (e.g., Surgery, Cardiology, Compensation and Pension Exam)				

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the questions in the current survey (R1).

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

The reported ease of scheduling appointments at a VA facility was mostly positive for this round of surveys; however, concerns were noted.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	63.3%
Mostly Agree:	16.3%
Neutral:	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	9.0%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 132 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities at VHSO. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments stated that most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment. These veterans indicated that the automated system was not reliable. 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:

- *“Takes too long to see a specialist or for that matter too long to schedule any appointment at the Mount Vernon VA Outpatient Clinic.”*
- *“Women’s clinic visits must be scheduled separately from primary care wellness, far in advance.”*
- *“I receive a letter in the mail when I have an appointment. It can be a hassle if I need to change it.”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire qualified new staff and fill vacancies, especially in specialty areas and at the outpatient clinics, in order to reduce scheduling delays and changes. Review function of the automated system to ensure that veterans can efficiently reach their desired party to schedule appointments. Review whether current scheduling practices accommodate walk-in visits efficiently.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks (VHSO) is committed to ensuring that Veterans receive timely access to care. To achieve that commitment, we use a combination of in house services, traditional Non-VA Care, and the Veteran Choice Program. Using all avenues available allows appointments to be scheduled in the most efficient manner possible. Walk-in visits are

available, and we have utilized Saturday clinics as well to increase access. The VISTA Scheduling Enhancements are rolling out nationally in late FY16 – and it is anticipated that the software enhancement will greatly ease scheduling barriers.

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 Southwest Missouri region in order to find the location of their appointments.

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

	R1
Strongly Agree:	80.7%
Mostly Agree:	6.0%
Neutral:	7.2%
Mostly Disagree:	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	4.2%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 144 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. Many veterans indicated that the signage and maps were clear and appropriate.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“All areas are properly marked with a very positive and helpful staff if you need assistance.”*
- *“I checked in at the front and they took me back to the room for my appointment.”*
- *“They give you directions every time.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to keep updated signage available throughout the facilities, and ensure that all veterans are aware of any detours due to any campus construction.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO recognizes the need for ongoing efforts to ensure signage is both accurate and current. We concur with this recommendation and through Interior Design and Public Affairs efforts will work to ensure signage is used that is beneficial to staff, patients, and visitors. In addition to accurate signage, all employees are expected to provide high level customer service, and as such should be available to personally escort or direct Veterans and visitors when necessary to ensure they reach

their appointment location without issues, which is part of the I CARE (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence) core values.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

While it’s clear that most veterans at VHSO report clean facilities throughout the network, some reported less than satisfactory conditions in the restrooms. Veterans also commented that while clean, some facilities seem outdated or otherwise aesthetically unappealing.

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

	R1
Strongly Agree:	75.9%
Mostly Agree:	15.1%
Neutral:	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	0.6%
Strongly Disagree:	1.8%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 151 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region were clean. Only eight veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that these facilities were clean.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Been going to this clinic for several years now. It is always very clean, including the restrooms!”*
- *“The Mount Vernon clinic is old and dated, but is well-maintained and clean.”*
- *“The main men's restroom near the Dental Clinic is always a mess. I don't know why they have one urinal in such a busy area. The guy is always cleaning it. I think that they should have a drain under the urinal. It would make it easier to clean.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to beautify VHSO facilities and create a welcoming environment. Request further feedback from Environmental Management Service staff about structural issues that result in unclean or unsanitary conditions.

VA Medical Center's Response:

VHSO remains committed not only to high quality care, but to clean and well-maintained facilities. We will work to ensure any issues with cleanliness are rectified immediately. Some of the concerns with the structure and age of the Mt. Vernon facility will be rectified when the clinic is relocated to the new Springfield Clinic that has recently been awarded.

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

While most veterans report satisfaction with their appointment times, it is clear from the commentary that it takes more than 30 days to schedule an appointment for many respondents.

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

	R1
Strongly Agree:	60.8%
Mostly Agree:	17.5%
Neutral:	10.8%
Mostly Disagree:	2.4%
Strongly Disagree:	8.4%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 130 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. Some veterans reported considerably longer wait times to see specialists.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Appointments depend on which clinics you are visiting. Dates can be from one week to 3 months. There is a lack of some specialist at each facility.”*
- *“My doctor has a lot of walk-ins that slow him down.”*
- *“Transportation considerations caused a delay of a couple of weeks.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times. Ensure that patients' scheduling requests receive response in 1 to 3 days from point of contact.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Timely access to care is crucial to taking care of Veterans, and VHSO makes every effort to schedule appointments timely to ensure all patients are responded to and seen quickly. Wait times are reviewed on a recurring basis, and most of our wait times are very low on average. In some clinics, we have implemented Saturday clinics and evening hours to increase capacity, and the Choice Program is offered to any Veteran who cannot be seen within 30 days.

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 shows that a large number of veterans are pleased with VA clinical communication.

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

	R1
Strongly Agree:	72.9%
Mostly Agree:	12.7%
Neutral:	7.2%
Mostly Disagree:	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	5.4%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 142 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication with contractors hired by the VA, or between the VA and its own contractors which affected their health care.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The Women's Clinic really makes me feel comfortable and cared for.”*
- *“Disclosure sometimes takes some prodding, but for the most part they are fair.”*
- *“It takes them up to 3 weeks to read their Secure Messaging.”*

Recommendation: Reexamine standards for returning patient correspondence in a timely manner, including written, electronic, and phone messages. Ensure that each veteran understands when and how they will receive a response from the VA.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO has taken the initiative in several ways to enhance communication with our Veteran patients. For example, VHSO is a pilot site for the text messaging program currently under development in the VA. We look forward to participating in this pilot to increase the mechanisms by which information is sent to patients with regard to appointments and other reminders. Another program that has been implemented is embedding staff from Tri West at our Fayetteville campus. While the staff are currently in training, it is anticipated that this will provide a direct link to Tri-West so that Veterans can have their questions answered and receive their appointments in a more timely manner. With regard to secure messaging, we have a robust tracking system in place, and the coordinator will escalate any message that has not been reviewed after 24 hours.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction.

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

	R1
Strongly Agree:	66.9%
Mostly Agree:	9.0%
Neutral:	9.0%
Mostly Disagree:	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	10.2%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 126 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Many concerns expressed by veterans related to specialty care access in a timely or convenient fashion. Responses also indicate that there are still issues regarding pain management since the VA adopted new opioid prescription policy and the DEA rescheduled several prescription painkillers.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My last Annual Physical consisted of filling out paperwork that she had never done before. There was nothing even close to being a physical done. ... As I was getting shoved out the door I lifted my shirt and showed her a skin cancer that was on my back. I finally got it cut out after about 3 months.”*

- *“Could be a little better, it all depends on who in the office you go through to set it up. Now if your team doctor requests it, it gets done very quickly.”*
- *“I saw a nurse and a PA during my appointment. My condition was properly diagnosed and treatment was recommended.”*

Recommendation: Increase efforts to fill vacancies for specialists to improve timely patient access to necessary services. Provide further guidance to clinical staff regarding appropriate use of appointment time and communication with patients. Provide descriptions of appointment structure to veterans ahead of the appointment so they will have informed expectations.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, we continue to remain committed to providing access to all Veterans. If there is any situation where a patient cannot be seen within 30 days, we refer them to the Choice Program so they can be seen in their local community. We have also utilized Saturday clinics and extended hours to reduce wait times for Veterans. While we cannot provide appointment structure in advance to every patient, we are happy to work individually with a Veteran if he or she has a concern about their visit. Veterans with these or other concerns are encouraged to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

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

The reported respect shown at VHSO is one of this region’s high scores. More than 86 percent of respondents reported that they are receiving the respect they feel they deserve during their VA medical experience.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	75.3%
Mostly Agree:	11.4%
Neutral:	5.4%
Mostly Disagree:	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	6.0%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 144 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. The data suggest 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:

- *“Secure Messaging and being at the clinic are two different experiences.”*
- *“Usually treatment seems to be something they have to do and in and out, as fast as possible, and the doctor spend nearly the entire time on the computer reading and typing.”*
- *“They answered my questions, offered the necessary paperwork etc., and seemed to understand when I decided to decline.”*

Recommendation: Investigate and provide opportunities for sensitivity trainings for staff, particularly for the staff who interact with women veterans.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

All new employees are required to take Customer Service Training. We also educate staff on the VA I CARE Values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Engagement). The newly appointed Medical Center Director has placed an increased emphasis on treating all stakeholders (patients, visitors, employees, and community partners) with respect in all interactions. VHSO will continue to educate staff through various forums including: Town Halls, In-Service Trainings, and other educational programs.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

A majority of veterans surveyed indicated a willingness to positively recommend VHSO region VA facilities to other veterans. Nearly 80 percent of the respondents indicated they would recommend the VA to other veterans.

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R1
Strongly Agree:	70.5%
Mostly Agree:	9.0%
Neutral:	6.0%
Mostly Disagree:	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	9.6%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 132 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“Overall, I have always received excellent care at this clinic. I have actually recommended this clinic to several vets.”*
- *“I have been being treated at Mount Vernon since 1995 and have always found them to be professional and helpful.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“They seem somewhat understaffed.”*
- *“Probably all except mental health. The rest of the facility is run very well by people who genuinely seem to care about the population they serve. In MH's defense, they were all nice people, they just didn't listen very well and couldn't seem to figure out how to give me what I wanted.”*

Recommendation: Provide additional resources to Patient Advocate program so veterans feel they have a place to voice their concerns and feel confident that those concerns will be addressed.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Since the results of this survey were sent, the Patient Advocates have been realigned into Voluntary Services. Data from Patient Advocates is also reviewed by the leadership daily. The results of our satisfaction surveys indicate most Veterans are very highly satisfied, but it is important to us that all Veterans and their families are satisfied. We have implemented a Veterans Voice Advisory Council that reports through our governance structure to the leadership. This is made up of Veterans and their families, and they report concerns or suggestions via monthly meeting minutes to the leadership team, which includes the Medical Center Director, Associate Medical Center Director, Chief of Staff, and Associate Director for Patient Care Services. Through this mechanism, we have been able to implement suggestion boxes and other ideas presented as well as address various concerns. A Veteran is also a member of the Executive Leadership Board, the highest level of the governance structure. This gives another avenue of input to the leadership from Veterans so that changes can be made as necessary to ensure continued satisfaction.

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. For this reason, a new question was added to the survey for this period. The majority of veterans reported having a positive experience with their personal doctor or nurse.

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

	R1
Excellent:	65.7%
Above Average:	15.1%
Average/Fair:	9.0%
Below Average:	4.2%
Poor:	6.0%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 134 indicating that their overall experience with their personal doctor or nurse was Excellent or Above Average. Veterans who described positive experiences with mutual respect, thorough communication, and genuine interest in patient health. Many veteran respondents had gone through several doctor or team changes, sometimes to their dissatisfaction. Multiple respondents claimed that their doctors spent too much of their visits completing paperwork rather than discussing health concerns.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The doctor was quick, professional, and as best I could tell competent.”*
- *“My current doctor is one of the best doctors I have ever had. I only hope that he stays around. Since being with the Branson, Mo. clinic I have had the same team, but 3 different doctors. I liked my first doctor, but before I got a chance to see him again about a year later he was gone. My second doctor I did not like at all, but he did his job. Then he was gone. I only hope that this doctor stays around for more than a year or so.”*
- *“I am uncomfortable with my doctor. I get the sense that he is used to treating middle-aged men and that he is uncomfortable, and perhaps unfamiliar, with treating a female in her 30s.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to recognize staff who demonstrate exceptional care when interacting with veterans. Create streamlined process for veterans to change teams.
--

VA Medical Center's Response:

The newly appointed Medical Center Director has implemented a monthly Town Hall where employees are recognized for years of service, Great Catch Awards, and other recognition. Employee of the Month, Employee of the Year, Heart of the VA, and Special Contribution Awards are a few of the other ways that VHSO recognizes those employees who go above and beyond in their service to Veterans. In terms of changing teams, a newly designed process has been implemented. We do review every request thoroughly prior to approving a request to change teams so that we can ensure that continuity of care is in the forefront of the decision.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

The VA Medical Center's continued focus on respect and communication through the "I CARE" Program appears to be improving veterans' overall experiences.

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

	R1
Excellent:	51.2%
Above Average:	22.3%
Average/Fair:	14.5%
Below Average:	3.6%
Poor:	8.4%

One hundred and sixty-six (166) veterans responded to this question with 122 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was Excellent or Above Average. Twenty (20) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility was either Below Average or Poor.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"I have never had a bad experience at the Fayetteville VAMC, Patience is required when a specialist is needed."*
- *"Transportation issues arise for overnight stays and immediate problems. I do not have a car, and it is difficult to find anyone that can take me to Mount Vernon or Fayetteville. The DAV does provide rides, but I have to schedule things at least 2 if not 3 weeks in advance to be sure of space on van. Overnight stays at Fayetteville are much more complicated."*

- *“My experience with Fayetteville has been pretty negative. On the other hand, the experience with my visits to Mount Vernon have all been very positive. I tell other veterans with whom I speak, “I’ve never had a bad experience at Mount Vernon and I’ve never had a good experience in Fayetteville.”*

Recommendation: Since the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program is an ongoing survey, develop a workgroup comprised of area veteran leaders, VA staff, and veterans’ organizations to help implement the recommendations received from multiple sources, including the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program. Implement a system that establishes and tracks follow-up response times to veterans’ questions and concerns.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, there are a number of ways by which we receive and provide feedback to patients and their families. The leadership of VHSO regularly visits areas throughout the facility and CBOC’s through a rounding process. The Veteran Voice Advisory Council meets monthly and submits minutes to the leadership via the Veterans Experience Committee. We also hold quarterly meetings with Veteran Service Organizations and other advisory groups through Voluntary Services and the Women’s Clinic, and we have implemented suggestions and taken corrective action on a number of issues brought forth through those means. VHSO is also a member on several local community advisory boards, which allows us to strengthen our community engagement and partnerships. Since late 2014, we have also conducted quarterly town halls that are public to all so that we can hear any concerns or feedback. These have been very well received and will continue. Through these efforts and our robust Patient Advocate program, we believe there is a system in place to address concerns, and welcome feedback from all stakeholders at any time on ways we can improve.



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 summary report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“If the VA Clinic or VA Hospital cannot provide satisfactory explanation of the Veterans condition or illness then they should send the veteran to a private specialist for further evaluation.”*
- *“More primary care providers would be helpful.”*
- *“Primary Care for females that incorporates well-woman exams, instead of seeing separate providers. A (healthy) dining option on site to eat at after a fasting lab appointment. Information on how to pursue a referral to a specialist, and what visits and frequency are authorized.”*
- *“As for my needs to date, The Branson VA is wonderful. They do seem to have a problem keeping Doctors, that is, I have never seen the same one ‘twice’ during my yearly Physicals.”*
- *“Major facilities (hospitals) too far apart, nice if VA could join with local hospitals someway for major needs.”*
- *“Since I am out in CA every year and then back home to MO, it would be nice to have a secondary primary care doctor.”*
- *“I have been satisfied with my care, however I must travel 50 miles to get to Mount Vernon and 80 miles to get to Fayetteville, AR. Therefore a facility in Joplin, MO would be beneficial.”*



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 VHSO medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. One hundred and forty-one (141) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Southwest Missouri 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 support team for Team 9 (lab techs, nurses, and clerks) of the medical staff at the VA Medical Center in Mount Vernon, MO, does an excellent job of keeping the veteran in the loop and not forgetting to contact them for their follow-up visits every 15 months.”*
- *“Dr. P. in pulmonology is exceptional in her treatment and care. Her nurse is one of a kind. Dr. T. in Ortho goes one step beyond to ensure patients understand what is going on with their problem.”*
- *“My Team 3 nurse is J.S. and her assistant or whatever she is called is G.S. These two people always keep me informed, up to date and are always responsive to my requests for appointments and follow ups on my labs should I have any questions. They are always in touch with my doctor and follow through with requests and answers.”*
- *“Optometrist doctor, Dr. W. took great care of my injured eye and continues to provide excellent care as my optometrist.”*
- *“Dr. B. and mental health team who always answers the phone on the first or second ring. Please give this team special recognition!”*

- *“My Primary care team #4 Dr. D. is the most professional doctor I have ever had. He actually cares about his patients, and we (his patients) actually feel cared for and about. He and his staff always call and check on patients. I have received calls from Doctor D. as late as 6:30 or 7 in the evening. Just knowing he stays late to call and check on his patients is awesome. He is hard when he needs to be, but you know it comes from a caring place, and that you are not just a patient. He, and his staff treat us vets with more respect, and caring than most. That is so important to us, that we feel like not just a patient, but we are a member of a caring team who makes us feel like family. Dr. D. and his whole staff deserve something for their level of care they gives everyone of us vets. Thank You, and God Bless.”*

Recommendation: Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks 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:

On behalf of the Medical Center Director, VHSO would like to thank Senator McCaskill and staff for the work that went into the data collection. While we believe we do great work, we know there is always room to improve. The feedback of all stakeholders is vital to this effort. We do appreciate our employees and the high level of care they provide Veterans, and it is their dedication to the mission of taking care of Veterans that makes us successful. The robust awards program and performance appraisal program in place will continue to be utilized to ensure employees are recognized for their efforts.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Southwest Missouri region is off to a great start reporting strongly positive reviews from veterans. This Summary Report will provide continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the Southwest MO VA facilities and offer 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 Southwest Missouri region VA facilities. It is evident from the veterans' responses that Southwest MO VA facilities are doing a superior job serving veterans across every category, particularly in the areas of respect, communication, wayfinding, and cleanliness. However, it is important that staff remain vigilant and responsive to veterans' concerns so that veterans continue to access the high quality care and customer service they rightly deserve.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together 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: Holly Anthony, John Walker, Nancy Fazzino, D. L. Peppers, and Jack Hembree.