



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
VA St. Louis Health Care System

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2015 – STL – 05



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



St. Louis 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 clinics, both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the 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 fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the St. Louis region facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 28, 2015

To the Director of the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the St. Louis Region. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the St. Louis region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the St. Louis VA's 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. While in some ways the report suggests veterans' experiences at the VA either decreased or plateaued, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the new rating scale we implemented for the current round of surveys. 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, as well as their initiative in creating an action plan for moving veterans' services forward called "Gateway to the Future." It appears that the leadership at the St. Louis 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 of my partners at the St. Louis VA Medical Center 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.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Chris Holland
Brendan Fahey
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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 St. Louis 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 St. Louis VA Medical Centers and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as St. Louis VA or VA) through the period ending April 13, 2015. 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 St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the St. Louis VA Medical Center;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the St. Louis VA Medical Center to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the St. Louis VA Medical Center; 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 of 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 the St. Louis VA Medical Center 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 those VA facilities located in the St. Louis region through the period ending April 13, 2015. In the St. Louis region, four hundred six (406) 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, 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 Senator McCaskill's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses, excluding 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 reviewed comments to be included in the report. Reported comments were chosen based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the given statement. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments not having as significant a level of relevance to the statement presented, the comments missing key information to draw a conclusion, or volume.

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 13, 2015. During this period, four hundred six (406) veterans completed a survey for the St. Louis 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 fifty-nine percent (59.6%) 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	1.7%
Korean War	3.9%
Vietnam War	59.6%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	17.2%
Iraq/Afghanistan	13.5%
Other	16.7%

In the survey, over fifty-four percent (54.7%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John Cochran VA Medical Center. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

St. Louis VA Medical Center - Jefferson Barracks Division	44.1%
St. Louis VA Medical Center - John Cochran Division	54.7%
St. Charles Clinic	5.4%
St. Louis CBOC	3.2%
Washington, MO CBOC	4.2%
Belleville, IL CBOC	0.2%

Hope Recovery Center	0.0%
Primary Care Team 1 Annex (4974 Manchester Avenue)	1.7%
Primary Care Team 2 Annex (2727 Washington Avenue)	3.2%
St. Louis Vet Center	1.0%
Other	9.6%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the St. Louis VA Medical Center. Four hundred six (406) veterans reported using the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	37.9%	Emergency Room	5.7%	Extended Care	1.5%
Outpatient Clinic	11.6%	Mental Health Services	13.3%	Dental	2.7%
Pharmacy	6.4%	X-Ray	6.4%	Laboratory	9.9%
Travel/Enrollment	2.2%	Main Lobby	3.2%	Specialist Visit	14.5%
Inpatient Care	2.5%	Women’s Clinic	3.9%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.7%
Prosthetics	1.5%	Podiatry	1.5%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	0.2%
Other	32.0% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, Compensation and Pension Exam)				

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey questions. Results from the most recent survey (R5) are marked “current,” and results from previous reports (R4, R3, R2, & R1) are also included. 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.

To allow for comparison of results from previous Summary Reports, the current responses have been placed underneath the previous response options for each question.

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.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		71.6%	64.2%	88.9%	74.4%
No:		28.4%	35.8%	11.1%	25.6%
Strongly Agree:	37.7%				
Mostly Agree:	22.2%				
Neutral:	16.7%				
Mostly Disagree:	7.9%				
Strongly Disagree:	15.5%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 243 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments continued to state most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I usually have to call for the case manager and then wait for two or three days to get a response. I called on Oct 31 got a call back on the same day and got an appointment for Nov 3 with the Dr. I had a lump and tenderness in my breast; the Dr. checked it and I got an appointment for Nov 19 for a mammogram. Last year I would have to wait till next year just to see the Dr. Thank You Ms. McCaskill.”*
- *“Due to changes in scheduling future appointments at VA, I am unable to schedule appointments that used to be routine. They have now instituted a 60 day maximum scheduling. My appointments are 3 to 4 months apart. This requires me to call the VA and jump thru many hoops to schedule routine visits. My question "Why this 60 day appointment schedule change?" Also, the time from ordering meds/equipment to receiving the order is very long. I have run out of prescription meds more than once due to this long wait period.”*
- *“I visited one doctor and he said I needed new glasses as my prescription had changed. I was never contacted. I finally saw a doctor and got a new prescription. The people that order the glasses said it would take about two weeks to get them. After three weeks I called. No call back in three days. Three days later I called again. No call back for another three days again.”*

Recommendation: Continue present efforts to improve access for Veterans to Patient Advocates and Quality Management Staff. Consider implementing an automated appointment reminder system that can notify patients before each scheduled visit and also implementing a means of ensuring that patients will receive replenishments of medications before prescriptions have expired.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We have continued our practices of using the automated telephone system to place calls to the phone numbers listed in the Veterans’ electronic medical record two days before the appointment. Staff make phone calls to the Veterans on the day before an appointment and, at check out for every visit, all appointments in the next 2-3 months are printed and given to Veterans. Our primary care team places calls 48 hours after discharge from the hospital, to check the status of the Veteran and to ensure all appointments needed for follow up care are made. Additionally the Veteran’s primary care team makes contact with Veterans who were seen in the Emergency Room within 2 days to ensure that any appointments for follow up care are made. Through MyHealthyVet website Veterans are able to see all appointments and engage in secure messaging with our staff and appointment reminders sent. Veterans are encouraged to provide their current contact information especially a working phone number and enroll in MyHealthyVet. Veterans are able to request medication refills through the pharmacy automated phone line, through MyHealthyVet secure messaging and through their RN care manager. The Veteran’s primary team uses the Veteran’s preferred method for communication and request in developing the Veteran’s plan.

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 St. Louis region in order to find the location of their appointments.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		88.4%	84.9%	92.1%	90.5%
No:		11.7%	15.1%	7.9%	9.5%
Strongly Agree:	53.2%				
Mostly Agree:	20.4%				
Neutral:	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	4.4%				
Strongly Disagree:	9.6%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 299 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. We continue to view this as a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps

to help veterans navigate the VA facilities even while renovations continue at John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks.

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 underway.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Construction made parking a nightmare. I had to walk almost 1/2 a mile. With a concussion and dizziness, and constant headaches.”*
- *“The Cochran hospital is easy to find, but inside of the facility was like a maze. The parking was in the rear, but the entrances were all up front.”*
- *“John Cochran is just a big place, sometimes the appt. sheet doesn't give you specific room #'s because they are actually waiting rooms.”*

Recommendation: Continue present efforts to update all interior and exterior signage that will ensure that all visitors to the Medical Center will be aware of any changes due to ongoing construction.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The VASTLHCS previously updated way-finding signage via the contractor who installed new signage three years ago. We recently developed this capability locally which will allow real time correction as needed.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans’ reported satisfaction in the cleanliness of the St. Louis VA facilities was mostly positive. However, for those veterans who reported concerns with cleanliness, their comments focused on the condition of the restrooms and the ongoing renovations at the John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks campuses.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:		36.7%	30.2%	48.4%	26.0%
Above Average (Good):		26.4%	26.4%	29.7%	25.4%
Average/Fair:		24.4%	37.7%	15.4%	24.2%
Below Average:		4.8%	0.0%	2.2%	14.2%
Poor:		7.7%	5.7%	4.4%	10.1%
Strongly Agree:	35.5%				
Mostly Agree:	31.7%				
Neutral:	15.8%				

Mostly Disagree:	10.3%				
Strongly Disagree:	16.7%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 274 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean. One hundred ten veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The offices were clean, but had a worn out look and cluttered with equipment so that you could barely close the door.”*
- *“They had the stairwell well taped off to keep dust from the work to a minimum.”*
- *“Restrooms always reek and usually need cleaning.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanness or obstructions to high-traffic areas due to ongoing construction. Additionally, given the concerns noted about the cleanliness of restrooms, consider establishing a minimum daily frequency for cleaning restrooms.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The Environmental Management Service (housekeeping) have been working very hard to improve services and are proud of the service they provide to our Veteran and families. They take pride in serving other Veterans through their environmental sanitation program. Daily staff are assigned to monitor public bathrooms to ensure they are adequately supplied and clean for use. Assigned staff round on public restrooms every 2-3 hours to ensure they are clean. If at any time Veteran or visitor identifies a need, they should notify a staff member or call the number posted on the mirror in the bathroom. The facility has renovated several public bathrooms to address appearance and function.

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

In previous rounds of this survey, this question was phrased, “Were you able to be seen by your provider in a reasonable amount of time?” Veterans commented that the intent of this question was unclear, since it could be interpreted to mean the wait time in the lobby on the day of the appointment, or it could be interpreted to mean the wait time between the requested and actual appointment. For this round of surveys, the question was rephrased in order to clarify intent.

The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time was mostly positive during this survey period, and this seems to indicate that the VA medical center is continuing to maximize scheduling appointments throughout the day.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
No:		28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
Strongly Agree:	35.5%				
Mostly Agree:	21.7%				
Neutral:	15.8%				
Mostly Disagree:	10.3%				
Strongly Disagree:	16.7%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 232 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 St. Louis region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“My doctor could always find a time to schedule my next appointment. And sometimes appointments were only two weeks apart.”*
- *“Most of the time, but sometimes wait time are excessive.”*
- *“The test was ordered by an outside provider who the VA had sent me to. It took multiple follow-ups from their office to get the test scheduled, even after I had taken the written consult to Ortho the day the doctor ordered it. It was about 3 months later, and postponed appointments with the outside provider due to the delay. Physical therapy was the same. I also found out this week that I was 3 months overdue for a follow up with neurology. At my appointment I was told that the couldn't schedule anything further than 1 month out and would call, when the time came and passed for an appointment I called and left messages that were never returned. Finally pharmacy personnel were able to get me an actual person on the line as the seizure medication I take was going to run out and I had no more refills.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients’ scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from point of contact.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Several recruiting and hiring processes have been recently improved and put in place, including the prioritizing and preferential recruitment of front end clinicians to enhance and sustain access. Through this effort, we have hired more than 100 front end clinicians and nurses this past year. The VASTLHCS strives to schedule appointments in real time based on the patient's desired date and the clinician's return to clinic date. In those instances where access is beyond 30 days, the VASTLHCS has developed a robust process for educating the patient in regards to the Choice care option. Note that when a veteran chooses the Choice option, the VASTLHCS still schedules a local appointment which is closed only after the Choice Third Party Administrator indicates a Choice appointment has been scheduled. Additionally, it is common for VASTLHCS to coordinate with providers to "double book", based on clinic usage patterns, an exam/appointment time for those veterans requesting quick access. For those appointment dates clinically determined to be greater than 90 days, an automated recall letter is sent to patients. The patient is asked to call the VASTLHCS recall center which then schedules a negotiated appointment date in real time.

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 reported having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the data showed that a large number of veterans had positive communication exchanges. However, concerns were noted.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
No:		28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
Strongly Agree:	42.1%				
Mostly Agree:	18.2%				
Neutral:	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	12.8%				
Strongly Disagree:	14.5%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 245 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Doctor was not aware why I was there (a regularly scheduled appt.) and apparently had not read my records before meeting with me. He did not address several statements that I made concerning my current health and was not interested enough in my ongoing liver disease and serious osteoarthritis to even ask me how things were going."*

- *“The staff are very friendly every time I visit and they always communicate to me all the procedures they are going to do. I am never left in the dark on anything.”*
- *“The doctor I saw on this date was exceptionally good at communication. He explained why he wanted to try something different with my treatment and made sure I understood and agreed with it. He spent extra time with me going over the options and discussing the pros and cons with each option. Overall, I was extremely pleased with this doctor.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Patient-Centered Care Principles are understood and adhered to by medical staff. Ensure that patient interactions include a willingness on the part of staff to listen to patients’ concerns, and to responds to them in a way that will let them know their feedback is valued.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Through our Patient Centered care initiatives, the facility is working to implement shared decision making to facilitate two way communication and goal setting with patients.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. That is why, beginning with this Summary Report, surveys will include veterans’ feedback on the following statement.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	39.9%				
Mostly Agree:	16.0%				
Neutral:	16.0%				
Mostly Disagree:	7.6%				
Strongly Disagree:	20.4%				

Four hundred and six (406) veterans responded to this question with 227 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:

- *“As I walk in to the emergency room, I was seen in less than 1 hour by a Doctor, given an ultra-sound, diagnosed, received medication and was on my way a little over three hours from the time I arrived.”*
- *“Not at all; no one would explain what was going on with my situation and to me that was unacceptable.”*

- *“The physician clearly stated several times that she did not have time to spend but wanted to focus on my "chronic high blood pressure issue.” Except, I have never had a problem with high blood pressure and she just chose not to listen to me or look at my chart.”*

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 sufficient time is allowed for physicians to meet with patients during visits to address concerns and answer questions regarding care.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We continue to train, promote and hold staff accountable to listen and engage Veterans in their care. Shared decision making is the foundational principle of Veteran Centered Care. This starts with listening to the Veteran and communicating and educating on medical care and treatment plan.

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

The reported respect shown at St. Louis VA facilities remained high. More than 67 percent of respondents reported that they were receiving the respect they feel they deserved during their VA medical experience.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		73.0%	67.9%	88.8%	70.7%
No:		27.0%	32.1%	11.2%	29.3%
Strongly Agree:	46.6%				
Mostly Agree:	20.7%				
Neutral:	13.5%				
Mostly Disagree:	7.1%				
Strongly Disagree:	12.1%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 273 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. The data suggested 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 disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The staff was just going through the motions with no sense of urgency or patient sensibility. You may wait or go was their attitude. They displayed a total lack of patient sensibility.”*

- *“Transport personnel did not check my arm band, ask my name or SSN/DOB. They were rude and inconsiderate.”*
- *“I have been quite happy with my personal treatment, I have had good doctors and I’ve been treated well.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts stressing improved patient/customer service through the “I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics.” Ensure that those staff members displaying I CARE values at all times are properly recognized, and administration is providing remedial education for those who are shown to be lacking.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Earlier this year, Secretary McDonald reasserted the VA’s commitment to the I-CARE values. As part of that initiative our staff underwent I-CARE training including stressing our core values and principles in providing the highest level of customer service to our Veterans. Each staff member individually reaffirmed their commitment to these values. The VA St. Louis Health Care System routinely recognizes and rewards those employees who exemplify the I-CARE principles. This is done through our Civility Star program, in which we highlight and publicize these employees, as well as our Morning Report recognition process, in which employee’s attend and are presented with an I-CARE certificate. Conversely, employees who do not display the proper I-CARE values are retrained and appropriately disciplined, as necessary.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

A majority of veterans surveyed indicated a willingness to positively recommend St. Louis region VA facilities to other veterans. Over 57 percent of the respondents indicated they would recommend the VA to other veterans.

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Yes:		69.8%	50.0%	81.5%	58.2%
No:		30.2%	50.0%	18.5%	41.8%
Strongly Agree:	36.9%				
Mostly Agree:	20.4%				
Neutral:	12.3%				
Mostly Disagree:	9.6%				
Strongly Disagree:	20.7%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 233 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“I’ve always been reasonably satisfied. The appointment times could be shorter and parking is a very inadequate. It takes a long time to find a spot to park.”*
- *“I find the VA medical centers in area pretty good overall, but they still need a lot of training for various situations.”*
- *“I have been getting VA care since 2005 and have never had a problem with appointment, prescriptions, etc.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“Interaction with staff was curt...like they were pissed off you were there, or were scamming or something. Everyone was angry, Drs., Nurses, Patients, even the lady at the parking garage.”*
- *“It they care for me as well as they do, they will likely care for others the same way. I do caution other veterans that the care can be slow, but it is clearly an issue of patient load, not a lack of concern for the veterans. If you doubt the issue of patient load try to find a good parking spot at any VA facility.”*
- *“Improve parking, provide better directional assistance within the facility, and improve provider compassion.”*

Recommendation: Continue building on existing relationships with stakeholders to ensure that the Medical Center can respond to concerns regarding quality of care and customer service.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We have regular and routine communication with our stakeholders. This includes a monthly Veteran Service Officer meeting, in which we also invite Congressional staff and other external Veteran groups to attend. In addition, we seek feedback from Veterans through our quarterly town halls and social media sites.

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 his/her personal doctor or nurse.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	39.7%				
Above Average (Good):	25.6%				
Average/Fair:	15.8%				
Below Average:	8.6%				
Poor:	10.3%				

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 265 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. Veterans who expressed dissatisfaction with their personal doctor/nurse had several different reasons for their responses, including: poor follow-up, communication, and longer-than-expected wait times.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I’m very happy with my VA doctors. The doctor that I saw on this visit, I had never seen before.”*
- *“This doctor was new to me and was not very patient to listen to my concerns.”*
- *“When you have an appointment with specialty doctor and the doctor has to cancel. Getting another appointment is outrage, you already wait six months, now you have to wait another six months or longer. If that doctor/nurse has to cancel and they do not have an opening within 30 day, they should make appointment with outside doctor at the VA.”*

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:

We value our employees and take every opportunity to recognize the women and men who serve those who served. Staff are recognized for service excellence at the Directors Morning Report, staff recognize other staff through our CREW (Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace) awards, and by the one on one interaction with our Veterans. Weekly an I-CARE story is shared and we provide certificate of recognition for the I-CARE value that was demonstrated. The facility tracks the number of clinic cancelations and services are actively engaged in improvement in areas where this occurs. Veterans are to be rescheduled based on the Veteran’s preference. Clinic Managers have been established in each of the Primary Care locations to provide on-site management and oversight to ensure that cancellations are minimized and Veterans are rescheduled timely.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

More than 51 percent of veterans reported Excellent or Above Average experiences at the St. Louis VA medical facilities, which remained steady since the last Summary Report.

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

	R5 (current)	R4	R3	R2	R1
Excellent:	22.7%	26.2%	24.5%	39.7%	29.1%
Above Average (Good):	28.6%	26.2%	20.8%	32.1%	13.9%
Average/Fair:	21.9%	22.9%	15.1%	11.5%	23.4%
Below Average:	12.6%	11.6%	20.8%	7.7%	17.1%
Poor:	14.3%	13.1%	18.9%	9.0%	16.5%

Four hundred six (406) veterans responded to this question with 208 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was Excellent or Above Average. One hundred nine (109) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility was either Below Average or Poor.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Without exception the clerical and nursing staff at this CBOC is extremely friendly, helpful, professional, and respectful. These folks are the true heroes of the VA Health Care System and this sentiment extends to the employees and volunteers at Cochran Hospital as well. I have also found the doctors at Cochran to be a cut above any others as well.”*
- *“Everyone is very friendly at our clinic. You are treated with respect and privacy that is required.”*
- *“The staff was just going through the motions with no sense of urgency or patient sensibility. You may wait or go was their attitude. They displayed a total lack of patient sensibility.”*

Recommendation: Continue to implement the recommendations from stakeholders, the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP) surveys to build on improvements with patient experience. Ensure that specific improvement strategies such as Service Level Liaisons, Telephone Care Collaborative and Primary Team integration are achieving their expected results.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Service Level Liaison program has been fully implemented and the area's liaison photo and contact information is posted. The telephone collaborative has shown a significant improvement in our telephone systems. Response time has decreased, calls are answered faster, and there's been a decrease in percent of calls dropped in the response time to call. Clinics and services receive weekly data on the performance with regards to timeliness. Primary Care Patient Care Aligned Teams have been fully implemented and each teamlet is fully staffed.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

The current summary report discloses various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section includes some 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. All comments were provided to the VA.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Appointments are too far apart, the doctors push you out the door as quick as possible and you leave your appointments unsure if what was said to you was the most educated choice.”*
- *“Waiting areas are extremely overcrowded and amount of staff is far too few for all the personnel there to receive medical care in a timely manner.”*
- *“They have bankers’ hours and do not operate like other hospitals or clinics. If you have the flu or virus or need urgent care, the VA has no provision for this situation. If they do, I have never been informed.”*
- *“Average ONLY due to administration and clerks. Medical staff is above average. Saint Louis for over the last two years has had very poor OIF/OEF support. We are desperately in need of more social workers. Patient waiting rooms are much too small where many of the veterans are forced to be right on top of one another and is extremely uncomfortable for those suffering from PTSD and other medical conditions. The clerks are NOT sensitive about a veterans private information in those waiting rooms either”*
- *“The care is wonderful...when it is received. The wait times are often excessive, but that is also understandable given the patient loads almost everywhere in the hospitals.”*
- *“Several employees didn't speak clearly when repeating instructions to patients who need help getting checked in and could not understand the expected administrative actions or paper work!”*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

Is there a provider or a department that does an excellent job that you would like Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals working in the St. Louis region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Two hundred one (201) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis 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:

- *"My PCP, Doctor W. is outstanding. He listens to all you have to say about your care. No one knows my body like me, so he listens to what I have to say."*
- *"Ms. S. R. and her Diabetic Team have and are doing a terrific job. Giving all the tools I need to effectively manage my diabetes, as well as support and understanding. Best thing the VA has going for them!!!"*
- *"The Washington, MO clinic is by far the best VA facility I've ever been to. From the friendly ladies at the front desk to Dr. DS, everyone there is professional, friendly, but most of all caring. With all the specialists I see, there is always a ton of information to go over, Dr. S. does his best to make sure he covers everything. He has called me to follow up to see if new meds were working, not something I had ever experienced with another VA doc. Those guys are going the extra mile."*
- *"Infectious Disease: Dr. JM and KW P.A., Dr. M. and Ms. W. have been my primary care providers for years. Although I have private insurance, I prefer to get my medical care at the VA and I am very satisfied. Dr. M. and Ms. W. are always very professional, compassionate and always accessible."*
- *"Primary Care Team I has been great. Health care as it should be. As a GP dentist, I am a sophisticated health care consumer. I give them very high marks in professionalism and competency."*
- *"Dr. G. and the mental staff at the JB VAMC does a great job as a whole."*

Recommendation: The St. Louis 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:

Our employees are our most important resource in providing great care and customer service. We recognize those groups and individuals through several means: First we have our Civility Star program, in which veterans or other staff can nominate an employee to be highlighted and publicized in our period correspondence. Our daily Morning Report is also utilized to distinguish someone who has exemplified the I-CARE values through their interaction with a Veteran. There are also more traditional Special Contribution awards to reward employees who go above-and-beyond in their healthcare duties.



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.

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

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated "*The Volunteer Veteran Advisor is established and has been a valuable asset to our facility, leadership and Veterans. The Veteran Advisory Council has not been implemented due to changes in key staff members and a low number of volunteers for the Council. As part of the ongoing roll out of the Patient Center Care Program, this program will be evaluated again for implementation.*" What is the current status of the reevaluation of the Veteran Advisory Council?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The VASTLHCS continues to solicit participation on this council.

Overall experience at the VA facility

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated "*a volunteer position of Veteran Advocate has been established,*" in regard to recommendations made in the first report to ensure veterans have a voice for concerns regarding care and customer service. What is the current status of the Veteran Advocate?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Volunteer Veteran Advocate position is established.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated "*The Veteran Advisory Council has not been implemented due to...a low number of volunteers for the Council. As part of the ongoing roll out of the Patient Center Care Program this program will be evaluated again for implementation.*" As part of the effort to reevaluate the Veteran Advisory Council, what steps have been taken to improve veteran participation?

VA Medical Center's Response:

While the council has not been formally established, we have been utilizing teams of veterans in advisory roles to assist us in addressing specific issues such the design and adaptation of our JB major project. The development of a formalized council is still in progress.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*The 'I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics' has been implemented across the organization. Its effectiveness is measured by its outcome of high quality in the care, treatment and services and in service excellence. Point of service surveys, clinical outcome measures, customer service rating and complaints are tools used to evaluate the program.*" Although most veterans are expressing satisfaction with the quality of customer service received, a number of veterans continue to express deep concern with the level of respect and courteousness from staff. What is the status of the tools utilized by administrative staff to evaluate the quality of customer service and care?

VA Medical Center's Response:

We currently use SHEP but have been seeking establishment of Truth Point for real-time feedback. Leadership also rounds in patient areas to obtain feedback.



CONCLUSION

While the St. Louis VA is facing serious challenges with respect to leadership changes and efforts to provide area veterans with the best care possible, it is making progress with regard to customer service as evidenced in this most recent Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program report. 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.

Efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the St. Louis VA Medical Center are underway, and progress will continue toward increasingly positive results. The VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. The establishment of a Volunteer Veteran Advocate will provide a useful mechanism for soliciting feedback and assessing care; and once the Veteran Advisory Council is implemented, the VA will have another mechanism for ensuring veterans receive the high quality customer service they are rightfully due.

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: George Newell, Bob Murphy, Tom Mundell, Lowry Finley-Jackson, and Betty Gonzales.