



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 Medical Centers
John J. Pershing VA Medical Center

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2016 – PB – 02



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



Poplar Bluff Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

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

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

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

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

This report represents the second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Poplar Bluff 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 31, 2016

To the Director of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center,
Members of the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Poplar Bluff 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 Poplar Bluff region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Poplar Bluff 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 the report suggests veterans' experiences at the VA either decreased or plateaued—especially in the areas of communication, respect shown to veterans, efficiency of care, and cleanliness of facilities—we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the smaller number of responses we received during this survey period. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum growing 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 some of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report. It appears that the leadership at the Poplar Bluff 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 Poplar Bluff 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 VA medical facilities, starting right here in Poplar Bluff.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Kyle Klemp
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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 Poplar Bluff region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about John J. Pershing VA Medical Center and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as Poplar Bluff VA or VA facilities) through the period ending April 4, 2016. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the Poplar Bluff 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 in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA medical centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA health care survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA medical center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Claire's office, veteran leaders and the Poplar Bluff 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, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the Poplar Bluff region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 4, 2016. In the Poplar Bluff region, sixty-five (65) 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 Claire's office that was then entered into the database.

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

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, sixty-five (65) veterans completed a survey for the Poplar Bluff 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-one percent (61.5%) of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	3.1%
Korean War	4.6%
Vietnam War	61.5%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	13.8%
Iraq/Afghanistan	13.8%
Other	13.0%

Beginning with this survey period, respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Fifty-nine (59) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	91.5%
Female	8.5%

In the survey, more than seventy-six percent (76.9%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center. Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

John J. Pershing VA Medical Center	76.9%
Cape Girardeau CBOC	15.4%

Farmington CBOC	6.2%
Paragould, AR CBOC	1.5%
Sikeston CBOC	0.0%
West Plains CBOC	4.6%
Other	3.1%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Poplar Bluff VA medical facilities. Sixty-five (65) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	29.2%	Emergency Room	15.4%	Extended Care	3.1%
Outpatient Clinic	13.8%	Mental Health Services	13.8%	Dental	4.6%
Pharmacy	6.2%	X-Ray	1.5%	Laboratory	21.5%
Travel/Enrollment	0.0%	Main Lobby	0.0%	Specialist Visit	7.7%
Inpatient Care	10.8%	Women's Clinic	0.0%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.0%
Prosthetics	3.1%	Podiatry	3.1%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	1.5%
Other	16.9% (examples: Surgery, Cardiology, Compensation and Pension Exam)				

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R2) are marked “current,” and results from the previous report (R1) are also included. Survey questions appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

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

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	47.7%	44.4%
Mostly Agree:	24.6%	17.8%
Neutral:	9.2%	11.1%
Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	7.8%
Strongly Disagree:	13.8%	18.9%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 47 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff 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. Veterans expressed a desire to receive faster responses to their appointment questions and be able to receive follow up from previous appointments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I had to call twice to get appointment set up.”*
- *“Called for appointments, the VA scheduled my appointments the fastest and earliest as the medical staff could. (Very Pleased).”*
- *“They set my appointment over 30 days and then canceled and rescheduled it to over another 45 days. 75 days to see an eye doctor.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to make setting up appointments by phone as easy and efficient as possible. Continue to hire new staff and fill vacancies, especially in specialty areas and at the CBOCs in order to reduce scheduling delays and changes.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center has made a number of improvements over the last year with respect to ease of scheduling appointments. All Medical Support Assistant (scheduler) vacancies are automatically backfilled without going through the usual approval process, and we have hired sixteen (16) medical support assistants this year. In addition, a number of changes have been made to the phone system, which has resulted in significant improvements over the last two fiscal years. We continue to develop, refine and implement contingency plans to reduce appointment cancellations when physicians are unavailable.

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

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

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	58.5%	65.6%
Mostly Agree:	23.1%	11.1%
Neutral:	10.8%	8.9%
Mostly Disagree:	1.5%	2.2%
Strongly Disagree:	6.2%	12.2%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 53 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. Most veterans expressed satisfaction with the directions provided in reminder correspondence or by staff in the building. Veterans who expressed concerns pointed out that more directional signs, maps, and additional staff dedicated to greeting and directing would be helpful.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Provide a floor directory by the elevators: lab, hearing, vision, etc.”*
- *“Clear communication was provided by letter and by staff members.”*
- *“Signs to the particular clinic were easy to follow.”*

Recommendation: Continue present practice of providing staff to assist those looking for locations in the Medical Centers, and providing helpful signage that will ensure that all visitors to the Medical Center will be aware of the layout of the buildings. Consider printing directories so that veterans can find their appointment locations quickly and efficiently.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center encourages staff to offer assistance to anyone who appears to need help finding their destination. It is our preference that staff escort the visitors, rather than give directions. The medical center has also added volunteer staff to critical entry points at the medical center, to provide navigational assistance. In addition, a new wayfinding kiosk is available at the ground and first floor entry points, so Veterans can see a map to find their destination. Currently, thanks to a grant, a sign contract is underway that will totally redesign visual assistance aids for Veterans and should greatly increase the ease of wayfinding at the facility.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported similar levels of satisfaction with the cleanliness of Poplar Bluff VA facilities during this survey period.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	52.3%	53.3%
Mostly Agree:	26.1%	25.6%
Neutral:	18.4%	12.2%
Mostly Disagree:	0.0%	2.2%
Strongly Disagree:	3.1%	6.7%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 51 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region were clean. Two (2) veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region were clean.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Smelled clean and no trash around.”*
- *“The facility was very clean and orderly. It was not overly lavishly appointed which is the case with many civilian facilities, which charge outrageously high fees. I approve of this wholeheartedly as a common-sense cost-control.”*
- *“A lot of patients are being seen regularly, it's difficult to keep an absolute spotless clinic with so many people being seen.”*

Recommendation: Continue working to ensure housekeeping staff monitors high-traffic areas, especially hallways and restrooms.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The John J. Pershing VAMC receives many compliments on the cleanliness of our facilities. In fact, the Veteran Council that reviewed these survey results specifically noted the housekeepers are helpful and friendly; and they do a good job of keeping the facility clean. However, we are always looking to improve. As recommended in last year’s survey, we have placed digital signs throughout the medical center with a phone number for patients to call if they find an area that needs housekeeping attention. Housekeeping vacancies are also automatically backfilled when they occur, and this year we increased our housekeeping staff by an additional five (5).

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

The reported amount of time in between requesting an appointment and seeing a provider was mixed. While over half of the responses expressed positive attitudes toward wait times; over one-fourth (1/4) strongly disagreed that wait times were reasonable.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	41.5%	47.8%
Mostly Agree:	18.5%	13.3%
Neutral:	9.2%	8.9%
Mostly Disagree:	3.1%	7.8%
Strongly Disagree:	27.7%	22.2%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 39 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 Poplar Bluff region. However, 20 veterans strongly or mostly disagreed that the wait time was reasonable, making this an area that should be prioritized for improvement. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary, or that staffing levels were below what was needed.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- “It took anywhere from 4 to 6 weeks to be seen.”

- *“The appointment was within two weeks, far quicker than typical civilian appointments.”*
- *“My original appointment which I had to wait a month to obtain, had to be canceled due to the physician having a family emergency. When I was given the new appointment date, it was nearly a month later. The doctor has my condolences, but I found this to be unacceptable due to the fact, it wasn't my fault my original appointment was cancelled. Provisions should have been made to get me seen sooner since the physician had to cancel with me, and not vice versa.”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire new staff and quickly fill vacancies so that there are more appointment options and fewer scheduling changes for veterans. Implement a system that monitors wait times for different types of care at each facility and ensure that necessary adjustments are made in those areas to reduce wait times.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center hired seven (7) physicians, two (2) dentists, and a total of nine-one (91) employees over the last year. We use a variety of measures and data collection to closely monitor our wait times in all clinics and make adjustments to better meet the needs of our Veterans. Through fiscal year 15, we operated extended (evening) hours and Saturday clinics in primary care. Filling provider vacancies is always a priority at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, though physician recruitment in our rural area continues to present challenges for our facility. One of our strategies for addressing these challenges is to leverage community providers through Veterans Choice and non-VA options to reduce wait times.

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

Veterans reported similar satisfaction with the quality of communication between VA staff and patients.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	40.0%	48.9%
Mostly Agree:	21.5%	14.4%
Neutral:	12.3%	11.1%
Mostly Disagree:	10.7%	11.1%
Strongly Disagree:	15.4%	14.4%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 40 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Some lack of communication. Busy. This is due to the overload of patients. But the staff goes out of their way everywhere I looked.”*
- *“After one hour of waiting, I was told it would be just a few more minutes which turned into over one more hour of waiting and still did not get to see the person I had an appointment with.”*
- *“I still don’t know why they canceled my appointment.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that Patient-Centered Care Principles are understood and adhered to by medical staff. Ensure that patient interactions include both a clear explanation of situations, but also a place for patients to ask follow-up questions to further their understanding.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Patient-centered care remains a priority at the John J. Pershing VA Medical Center, and regular communication training and customer service reminder messages help keep these values in the forefront of staff minds; however, we can never rest when it comes to communication and patient-centered care, and will continue to stress these values to our staff. Our executive leadership team and supervisors regularly “round for outcomes” throughout the hospital and clinics. Facility leadership also meets monthly with Veteran Service Officers and other key stakeholders to share information and obtain feedback. Additional advisory groups sponsored by Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women’s Health, and Caregiver Support provide feedback on medical center services.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. The reported receipt of necessary care during the visit to the VA was mostly positive, but there was a higher number of those who disagree than last year. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	43.0%	51.1%

Mostly Agree:	13.8%	20.0%
Neutral:	9.2%	6.7%
Mostly Disagree:	4.6%	8.9%
Strongly Disagree:	29.3%	13.3%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 37 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. However, 22 strongly or mostly disagreed, making this another area that should be prioritized for improvement. 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 in fully addressing the veteran’s stated reason for visiting the provider.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have finally gotten my total knee replacement, but complications occurred due to not getting timely approvals for various care needed, including an emergency room visit after the surgery.”*
- *“The doctors couldn’t figure out what was wrong. They performed several procedures to treat what they suspected the issue was only to find out later that what they had done made the illness worse.”*
- *“I never got to see the provider.”*

Recommendation: Ensure that staff at all levels are trained on the importance of clear, consistent communication with veterans about what the expectations for care should be. Make sure that there is an open line of communication between doctors and patients, and all questions are addressed. Ensure that veterans know what avenues exist to make constructive comments about their care and that these veterans receive a timely response regarding their concerns.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

All Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) clinical staff receive TEACH training. TEACH training stands for TUNE in to the patient, EXPLORE the Patient’s concerns, preferences, and needs, ASSIST the patient with behavior changes, COMMUNICATE effectively, and HONOR the patient as a partner. The program emphasizes clear communication and asking for feedback to determine understanding by the Veteran. As a facility, we use surveys like this one and our Patient Satisfaction survey, as opportunities for improvement. The information is shared with staff and action plans for improvement are developed and implemented to improve the provided to our Veterans. Service line staff, department managers, and the patient advocate are available to assist

Veterans who have constructive comments. Contact for the patient advocate contact information is available on digital signage. Our goal is to provide resolution at the time of service if possible.

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

The reported respect shown to veterans at the Pershing VA decreased during this survey period. Veterans' concerns were noted.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	47.7%	56.7%
Mostly Agree:	20.0%	17.8%
Neutral:	9.2%	7.8%
Mostly Disagree:	3.1%	5.6%
Strongly Disagree:	20.0%	12.2%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 44 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region. One-fifth (1/5) of the responses expressed strong disagreement with the level of respect shown to veterans, identifying another area for the Poplar Bluff VA to prioritize for improvement. Veterans continued to report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The doctor and reception worker was very rude.”*
- *“All staff address veterans respectfully and always thank us for our service, something that's very nice to hear!”*
- *“Always! Always someone on the medical team and staff to thank a veteran for their time and service.”*

Recommendation: Continue to strengthen the culture of respect and quality customer service among all levels of staff at the VA. Organize frequent trainings sessions for all staff, focusing on each type of interaction they might expect to have with a veteran at the VA. Continue to recognize those employees and volunteers who show exceptional customer service and care, and work with employees who need development so they can respond respectfully and effectively in any given interaction with a veteran.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Respect is one of Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center's I CARE values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence); and we train frequently on the importance of respecting Veterans. All employees are required to annually reaffirm their commitment to I CARE values. Regular messages go out to staff about respect and I CARE, and special certificates are presented in staff meetings to those who model those values. Staff also utilizes their supervisors and the Patient Advocate to help resolve issues when patients are not satisfied.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

A smaller percentage of veterans surveyed indicated a willingness to positively recommend Poplar Bluff VA facilities to other veterans. While over fifty-eight percent (58.4%) strongly agreed that they would recommend the Poplar Bluff VA facilities, over 25 percent disagreed that they would do so. This is an area to prioritize for improvement.

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R2 (current)	R1
Strongly Agree:	44.6%	52.2%
Mostly Agree:	13.8%	10.0%
Neutral:	12.3%	13.3%
Mostly Disagree:	13.8%	5.6%
Strongly Disagree:	15.4%	18.9%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this statement with 38 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff region to other veterans. Veterans' concerns were noted.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *"I have sent quite a few friends that needed help there."*
- *"I was there to assist my ex-husband with his hospitalization and his end of life. My children were taking in their dad for his sake and end-of-life transition. I was impressed by the hospital and the death and dying comforts given to him at the time. I had never experienced that consideration during this time of sorrow before. I thought it was admirable that it was provided."*

- *“Have not had any problems with staff or doctor in the last three years. Prior there seemed to be a little of ‘I’m busy don’t bother me or I don’t have time for you’ attitudes. But it has really turned around and I enjoy going in for checkups. Entire staff seems to have a smile and asks may I help you.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“My husband saw a different doctor every time he went. There was little continuity of care. The doctors were overworked and didn’t take the time to find out what the problem really was.”*
- *“When they make an appointment they need to make sure they see the person in a reasonable amount of time. Our time is just as important to us as their time is to them.”*
- *“Local VA is fine, the problem is with Tri-Care which was created by Washington!”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire new staff and fill vacancies so that veterans are able to receive sufficient time with their provider, and more veterans are able to receive care. Be sure that veterans understand the reasoning for changes in their care, and that the comprehensiveness of care is kept to a high standard.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center has hired approximately 91 FTEE (full-time equivalent employees) over the past twelve (12) months and continues to hire staff to fill vacancies and enhance services. All new employees receive customer service training in New Employee Orientation, and all other employees take mandatory customer service refresher training each year. Digital signage and the new patient information guide include specifics about who Veterans may contact with concerns.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

The reported satisfaction with a personal doctor and nurse was mixed; however, in most areas there has been a slight improvement since last year. Although more veterans had positive experiences with VA medical staff, a large number of veterans still had varying levels of dissatisfying or neutral experiences. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	41.5%	40.0%
Above Average (Good):	18.5%	16.7%

Average/Fair:	15.3%	18.9%
Below Average:	6.2%	8.9%
Poor:	18.5%	15.6%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this question with 39 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that their overall experience with their personal doctor or nurse was “Excellent” or “Above Average.” Veterans who were dissatisfied with their experience commonly suggested improvements in wait times, responsiveness to the veteran, clear communication, and respect.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The doctors had difficulty diagnosing my husband's illness. He was given several diagnoses and treated for each one. When we took him to a doctor outside the VA system, he was diagnosed with lymphoma, and treatments he had been given at the VA hospital made treating it much harder.”*
- *“Staff always seem to treat patients with care. I've never had any personal issues with anyone at the VA Medical Center during my visits.”*
- *“The doctors and nurses are great, but when they are not able to provide you with something medically needed they put it off on another section of the VA rather than solving the problem; and I understand that at times they truly can't do anything and it's not their fault, YET the veteran's medical needs don't get met.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to make sure that a strong relationship can be built between doctors, nurses, and patients. Ensure that a system that establishes and tracks follow-up response times to veterans’ questions and concerns is maintained.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

As mentioned above, All Patient Aligned Care Team (PACT) clinical staff receive TEACH training. TEACH training stands for TUNE in to the patient, EXPLORE the Patient’s concerns, preferences and needs, ASSIST the patient with behavior changes, COMMUNICATE effectively, and HONOR the patient as a partner. The program emphasizes clear communication and asking for feedback to determine understanding by the Veteran. In addition, Veteran concerns expressed to the patient advocate are tracked through the Patient Advocate Tracking System (PATS). Our facility continuously monitors telephone responsiveness and makes adjustments in staffing to ensure prompt access to staff. Secure messaging (similar to email but secure) response time is tracked to ensure Veterans receive replies in a timely manner.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

While 60 percent of the responses received reported “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences at the Poplar Bluff VA medical facilities, a higher percentage reported “Poor” experiences during this survey period. This is an area to prioritize for improvement. Veterans’ concerns were noted.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	27.7%	33.3%
Above Average (Good):	32.3%	23.3%
Average/Fair:	7.7%	16.7%
Below Average:	10.8%	10.0%
Poor:	21.6%	16.7%

Sixty-five (65) responses were received to this question with 38 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was “Excellent” or “Above Average.” Twenty-one (21) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility as either “Below Average” or “Poor.”

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Phone always seems to be busy when I call, and will be told things are taken care of when they are not.”*
- *“Availability of physicians seems to be the biggest issue as it takes longer than expected to obtain an appointment for specialized clinics.”*
- *“I have been treated well by people working at the facilities I have visited.”*

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. Implement a system that establishes and tracks follow-up response times to veterans’ questions and concerns. Continue to hire and fill vacancies for staff in specialty care.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Improving our customer service is a high priority for the John J. Pershing VAMC to ensure our Veteran's experience is always excellent. We are implementing several initiatives to improve the Veteran's experience. In the inpatient units we have implemented hourly nurse rounding, the nurse manager is rounding on all inpatients to ensure all of their needs are met; and bedside reporting is being implemented which will empower the veteran to take an active part in their care. We have also implemented a new program called a Condition H (Help). The Condition H program is a way to increase patients/families involvement in care, increase patient satisfaction, and increase communication. Facility-wide customer service training and scripting will be implemented in all areas that interact with Veterans to ensure the Veteran's needs have been met and questions answered. The John J. Pershing VA Medical Center utilized the SHEP report quarterly to improve our patient satisfaction. Our goal is to create a culture of excellence in our Veteran's experience. By implementing MyVA Access, we will provide our veterans with timely, quality care.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Give the authority back to the doctors rather than create more levels of bureaucracy when providing care.”*
- *“Teach the team how to be better communicators and listeners. When you listen to the veterans, you can communicate better with them and their problems.”*
- *“Provide more specialized physicians. Example: the podiatry clinic needs more than 1 physician as his weekly schedule is only a couple days per week. There's far too many patients needing his service for only 1 doctor to be staffed.”*
- *“The facility itself was fine. The shortage of doctors or overbooking of appointments was a major concern for us.”*
- *“Make timely appointments with appropriate specialists and for MRIs.”*
- *“Hire more staff, needs more security and housekeepers. 6 of each isn't nearly enough.”*
- *“Nothing, the satellite office in Farmington is a great facility. I go to the Poplar Bluff hospital for exams not provided in Farmington and again, Gen. Pershing Hospital is a great facility.”*
- *“Provide intensive customer-service training to all staff that have contact with patients; doctors are understaffed and have no time to review patient records before talking with patients.”*
- *“We are pleased with the Poplar Bluff VA's progress as a whole from last year to this year. Some things take time to tweak and get better, but they are stable and heading in the right direction.”*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

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

There are many great professionals working in the Poplar Bluff region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Forty-eight (48) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Poplar Bluff 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:

- *"Dr. S...and her team, they always go out of their way to help me out!"*
- *"I like the Salem, Mo. Vet. Clinic. The staff are good people and care about us."*
- *"The appointment clerk, D the nurse, and Ms. O the Nurse Practitioner."*
- *"J at the West Plains VA check-in. Don't get any better or professional than he is. This man deserves a special recognition for his service. Ask any vet that goes there about J, and they will tell you the same."*
- *"Both the VA Hospital and the Paragould Clinic. Dr. S is outstanding."*
- *"Overall, all staff accomplish a good job of taking care of the patients. No particular person comes to mind other than the gentleman that works in the x-ray clinic."*
- *"Both the Cape clinic and the Poplar Bluff facility provided excellent and timely assistance and care."*

Recommendation: The Poplar Bluff VA 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:

At the John J. Pershing VAMC, we are honored to be a part of one of America's greatest agency missions; caring for our nation's veterans. Our employees are our most important resource in providing great care and customer service to meet that mission, and we continuously strive to make the facility the "employer of choice" for the best and brightest, most talented, and patient-focused colleagues who put Veterans first. Each year we reward our team members with performance awards, special contribution awards, and other special recognitions for achievement. Our daily Morning Report is utilized to distinguish those who have exemplified the I CARE values through their interaction with a Veteran.



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 first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"Our executive leadership team and supervisors regularly "round for outcomes" throughout the hospital and clinics. Facility leadership also meets monthly with Veteran Service Officers and other key stakeholders to share information and obtain feedback. Additional advisory groups sponsored by Voluntary Service, Mental Health, Women's Health, and Caregiver Support provide feedback on medical center services. From their feedback we have implemented several process improvements related to communication, Veteran satisfaction, using cloth gowns for women Veterans, and communicating laboratory results. Patient advocate contact information is readily available via digital signage, and staff refer patients with comments and concerns to the patient advocate as needed. MyHealthVet includes Secure Messaging that facilitates communication between the patient and their health care team(s), and also allows them to check their lab results and other clinical tests through the online program."* What feedback have you heard from veterans and stakeholders this year, and what have you changed to address the issues they have raised?

VA Medical Center's Response:

We have incorporated SHEP feedback from the veterans and are now conducting multi-disciplinary bedside roundings. We are piloting bedside reporting (nurse-to-nurse) during shift changes so that veterans can participate in and contribute to those discussions if they desire. Direct feedback from veterans resulted in our shifting the cardiology stress lab from the third floor to the second floor, just down the hall from radiology. This eliminates the necessity of veterans traveling back and forth between floors, is more convenient for our patients, and reduced the overall wait time during stress tests. In an effort to improve access, we moved to open access to Audiology; appointments are not required. Since paper exam gowns were exchanged for cloth gowns, women veterans and staff alike report increased satisfaction. Veteran feedback has encouraged us to find better ways of providing podiatry services. Formerly, our provider came from St. Louis one day each week. Now we have a local contract provider who is able to be onsite two days each week, and patients express greater satisfaction with the consistency of care.

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

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*Facility leadership is exploring the possibility of new internal signage*" in regard to recommendations made to increase the awareness of changes in the physical layout of the hospital. Were you able to create the new internal signage mentioned in the previous report?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Thanks to a grant, a sign contract is underway that will totally redesign visual assistance aids for Veterans, and should greatly increase the ease of wayfinding at the facility. In addition, a new wayfinding kiosk is available at the ground and first floor entry points, so Veterans can see a map to find their destination.

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

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*For a time, Environmental Management Service (Housekeeping) had unfilled vacancies. These vacancies have been filled and additional new positions have been approved. We expect improvements in cleanliness with this increased staffing.*" Have you been able to completely staff these new positions, and have you noticed any improvements since?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Yes, an additional five (5) housekeeping staff were added. The Veteran Council that reviewed our internal survey results specifically noted the housekeepers are helpful and friendly, and they do a good job of keeping the facility clean. Digital signs have also been added throughout the medical center with a phone number for patients to call if they find an area that needs housekeeping attention.

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*An additional avenue for patients to contact their health care teams is MyHealtheVet's Secure Messaging and 97.2 percent of these messages are responded to within the established timeframe of 3 business days.*" Although you have a high percentage of responses within 3 days for messages sent through MyHealtheVet, what has the VA done both to advise veterans about this program and also to assist those who either may not know about this service or have difficulty using this service?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Sixteen (16) medical support assistants were hired this past year. In addition, a number of changes have been made to the phone system, which have resulted in significant improvements over the last two (2) fiscal years.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Poplar Bluff region is making progress with regard to customer service at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center. 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 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 Poplar Bluff VA facilities.

Efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the Poplar Bluff VA Medical Center are underway, and progress will continue toward stronger results in the future. The VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously, especially with regard to healthcare efficiency and culture of respect; and the VA is implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program as well as other reporting mechanisms. The implementation of improved scheduling processes, wayfinding tools, and extended clinic hours for primary care appointments, combined with additional staffing resources, will enable the Poplar Bluff VA to better respond to veterans' needs and provide them with 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, also known as VA Ambassadors: Michael Clark, Robert Wake, Ray Aubuchon and Amanda Hendrix.