



**Claire McCaskill**

United States Senator

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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**

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Report No: 2016 – STL – 06



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<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 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 sixth 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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CLAIRE McCASKILL  
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## United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 31, 2016

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 sixth 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 mean it as much now as I did then. Today, I am pleased that more and more veterans are telling me how the St. Louis VA has changed for the better in recent years—how attitudes have improved; how respect shown is greater; how cleanliness and scheduling efficiency have increased. These are performance markers to be proud of, but there is still more work to do. Veterans understand how important placing a permanent leader at the St. Louis VA System is to keeping the progress we have already achieved. The report suggests veterans' experiences at the VA are generally improving across the board; however, we must be careful to avoid drawing too strong a conclusion based on the smaller number of responses. 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 many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. 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 VA medical facilities, starting right here in St. Louis.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill  
United States Senator

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

Chris Holland  
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Jason Rauch  
Nick Rawls

**Would you like your voice heard?**

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:  
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.



## REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the St. Louis 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 St. Louis VA Medical Centers and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as St. Louis 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 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 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 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, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the St. Louis region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 4, 2016. In the St. Louis region, two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

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

#### Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

### **Limitations**

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

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



## OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

### Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 4, 2016. During this period, two hundred forty-eight (248) survey responses were received in 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-six percent (56.5%) 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	2.8%
Korean War	8.1%
Vietnam War	56.5%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	19.4%
Iraq/Afghanistan	12.1%
Other	18.5%

Beginning with this survey period, respondents were asked to indicate their gender. Two hundred twenty-seven (227) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	86.3%
Female	13.7%

In the survey, over fifty-eight percent (58.1%) 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	39.1%
St. Louis VA Medical Center - John Cochran Division	58.1%

St. Charles Clinic	9.7%
St. Louis CBOC	2.0%
Washington, MO CBOC	2.8%
Belleville, IL CBOC	0.8%
Hope Recovery Center	0.4%
Primary Care Team 1 Annex (4974 Manchester Avenue)	6.5%
Primary Care Team 2 Annex (2727 Washington Avenue)	9.7%
St. Louis Vet Center	3.6%
Other	7.3%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the St. Louis region VA medical facilities. Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	27.4%	Emergency Room	12.1%	Extended Care	4.0%
Outpatient Clinic	14.1%	Mental Health Services	11.7%	Dental	4.8%
Pharmacy	9.3%	X-Ray	10.5%	Laboratory	15.3%
Travel/Enrollment	6.0%	Main Lobby	8.5%	Specialist Visit	16.9%
Inpatient Care	7.7%	Women's Clinic	2.4%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	3.2%
Prosthetics	5.6%	Podiatry	3.2%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	1.6%
Other	31.5% (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 (R6) are marked “current,” and results from previous surveys (R1 – R5) are also included. Beginning with the last Summary Report (R5), survey questions and rating scales appear differently from previous reports. In previous versions of the survey, veterans were posed questions with binary response options: “Yes” or “No.” Going forward, survey questions and response options have been rewritten to allow veterans to choose an appropriate response in a range of options from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” Survey questions now appear as a statement, and veterans have rated their agreement with the statement on a spectrum that spans from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

### **1. Ease of scheduling appointments**

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

#### **I was able to schedule my appointment easily.**

	<b>R6 (current)</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R4</b>	<b>R3</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Yes:</b>			71.6%	64.2%	88.9%	74.4%
<b>No:</b>			28.4%	35.8%	11.1%	25.6%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	44.7%	37.7%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	23.8%	22.2%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	10.9%	16.7%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	8.9%	7.9%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	11.7%	15.5%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 170 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. A few veterans expressed concern with their inability to schedule follow up appointments the same day due to the follow up appointment occurring outside the required 90-day window for the VA to schedule follow up appointments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have always had good results at the Washington CBOC. All that work there seem to care for your health. I have no complaints and the same goes for Jefferson Barracks where the mental health dept. seems more than adequate.”*
- *“Phone communications with the VA are extremely difficult-long, windy and mostly irrelevant prompts take too long and talking to a REAL LIVE PERSON IS WAY TOO HARD. Messages that are left may not get a call back for quite a while.”*

- *“The VA assigned a time for me to attend without my input. I was able to call and reschedule, but more than a month out. It would make more sense to have the veteran schedule the appointment the first time. This would cut down on rescheduling calls and missed appointments.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to work on improvements to the existing phone scheduling system. Consider options that will allow a veteran to schedule his/her next appointment even though he/she is outside the 90 day window.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*A new national VA scheduling software package is being implemented that will allow Veterans to be scheduled up to a year in advance. It is expected to be installed in St. Louis during this fiscal year. Deployment and implementation will follow after training is completed. In the meantime, the VASTLHCS continues to improve the automated phone system and working with the scheduling staff to better meet the Veteran’s needs.*

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

More veterans continued to report that they were able to easily 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.**

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Yes:</b>			88.4%	84.9%	92.1%	90.5%
<b>No:</b>			11.7%	15.1%	7.9%	9.5%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	60.9%	53.2%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	19.8%	20.4%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	9.7%	12.3%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	3.2%	4.4%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	6.4%	9.6%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 200 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. The continued improvement in veterans being able to navigate the VA facilities is a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to address this issue 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:

- *“The construction at JB seems endless and parking anxiety is the norm, especially for my combat brother who needs a handicapped van parking space that is exceedingly rare. The JB police decline to enforce the signs anyway despite our complaints. We don't know when, if ever, construction will end and if we will even get back the parking places we had. Make the VA tell us what is going on and when, please! Contractors get there early and of course take our parking places. This does not help our PTSD.”*
- *“There should be a sign that states room numbers as well as departments.”*
- *“Everyone is helpful and I am now aware of the location of the areas I visit.”*

**Recommendation:** Ensure that all interior and exterior signage is updated to reflect current changes due to construction. Consider printing directories and campus maps so that veterans can find their appointments quickly and efficiently.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The VASTLHCS has directories for both the Jefferson Barracks (JB) and John Cochran (JC) campuses available online. Additionally, we have comprehensive directories located at the main entry points with wayfinding signage to guide our Veterans to the appropriate point of care. An initiative has been started to correct and keep the interior signage accurate.*

**3. Cleanliness of the facility**

Veterans reported greater approval with the cleanliness of the VA facilities during this survey period.

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

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Excellent:</b>			36.7%	30.2%	48.4%	26.0%
<b>Above Average:</b>			26.4%	26.4%	29.7%	25.4%
<b>Average/ Fair:</b>			24.4%	37.7%	15.4%	24.2%
<b>Below Average:</b>			4.8%	0.0%	2.2%	14.2%
<b>Poor:</b>			7.7%	5.7%	4.4%	10.1%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	52.8%	35.5%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	23.0%	31.7%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	14.1%	15.8%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	3.6%	10.3%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	6.4%	16.7%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 188 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean.

Twenty-five (25) veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region were clean. 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.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I believe this facility does extremely well in the area of cleanliness especially in consideration of the very high volume of traffic it receives.”*
- *“I very rarely visit the STL VA but in general it has been clean of debris and trash. However it does seem outdated”*
- *“Smelled sour -- didn't look dirty but some air freshener might be good.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue current efforts to ensure that Environmental Management Service staff maintain their frequent monitoring of high-traffic areas and are notified as soon as a visitor notices evidence of uncleanliness or obstructions to an area. Additionally, it is appropriate to recognize the good work the Environmental Management Service is doing based on the survey results from our veterans.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*New EMS management has continued to make improvements on the cleanliness of the facility, with more routine rounding to ensure the facilities are continually clean. Periodic feedback is given to EMS and the staff about the state of cleanliness. When inspections and Veterans compliment areas on its cleanliness, that positive feedback is given to the EMS and the specific employees who work the areas.*

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

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

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

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Yes:</b>			71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
<b>No:</b>			28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	45.2%	35.5%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	20.2%	21.7%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	11.3%	15.8%				

<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	9.7%	10.3%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	13.7%	16.7%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 162 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. Also, in a few departments, veterans reported delays which might be the result of personnel shortages in certain departments.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I went in July, it is October and I just received my first set of appointments and I didn’t get to set my own times. I do have a job and would like the option of when my appointments are.”*
- *“My wait time was very brief. My transportation arrangements were easy to make and very convenient and pleasant.”*
- *“Went for blood work, after waiting for three hours to get this done, then gave up as there were people waiting four hours. Went to my Internist and got it done.”*

**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:**

*The VASTLHCS has had recent success in utilizing hiring fairs to recruit targeted staff in such areas as nursing, scheduling clerks, etc. These fairs combine screening, interviewing, on-board physicals, and initial background and credentialing processing all in a one day format. Using this approach, a recent nursing fair resulted in 32 nursing staff being selected. Another fair resulted in 37 scheduling clerks being given hiring offers the same day as the fair.*

*The VASTLHCS has worked hard to improve access to care for our Veterans. As a result of several initiatives, the VASTLHCS is in the top 25% of all VAs for getting Veterans access to care within proscribed timeframes.*

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

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

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

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Yes:</b>			71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
<b>No:</b>			28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	50.8%	42.1%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	16.5%	18.2%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	11.3%	12.3%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	8.5%	12.8%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	12.9%	14.5%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 167 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:

- *“The medical staff who conducted my appointment listened to my concerns and questions. They were respectful of my time and explained clearly what they were doing.”*
- *“Always communicate well at VA clinic. Have had problems with John Cochran and do not go back if I do not have to. I love the clinic.”*
- *“They give me very little information and only barely answer questions. They feel very scripted and don't want to help with issues or concerns. I asked about physical therapy and was given a cholesterol medication. My mental health practitioner very rarely speaks, spends an average of ten minutes...”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to improve communication best practices between medical staff and patients; urging staff to listen to patient concerns and provide complete answers to their questions regarding care.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*Initiatives specific to improving communication between VA staff and Veterans have been incorporated into many of the training programs. When staff is trained on I CARE principles, good communication is stressed as fundamental. Additionally, VA101 training is being provided to all staff to help improve the Veterans’ experience in our facility. In the cases that we receive patient feedback on negative staff interactions, targeted training is delivered to those individuals to address areas of deficiency.*

## 6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

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

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

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	52.0%	39.9%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	12.5%	16.0%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	12.1%	16.0%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	7.7%	7.6%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	15.7%	20.4%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 160 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Most of the concerns expressed by veterans related to communication between the veteran and their provider, and to turnover by medical staff requiring veterans to rebuild trust with a new provider.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Providers were not always available for my scheduled appointments when I arrived and the appointments had to be rescheduled.”*
- *“I received a thorough professional examination.”*
- *“I was told there was no injury to my shoulder in earlier visits and only upon my repeated requests and visits did they choose to order necessary testing.”*

**Recommendation:** Realizing that staff turnover forces veterans to establish new relationships with providers on a regular basis, emphasize the importance of staff taking the time to listen to their patients’ concerns. Let veterans know that their feedback is not only valued, but it is vital to their quality of care and success of treatment.

### VA Medical Center’s Response:

*In order to assure that all staff has an understanding of the I CARE principles, the training is given to all new employees, upon their starting their jobs, as well as annually staff recommit to the principles. Veteran feedback is welcomed and is sought out through town halls, Veteran Advisory Councils, the newly developed MyVA Community Council, Kiosk checkout questionnaires, and real-time responses.*

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

The reported respect shown at St. Louis VA facilities has greatly increased. Seventy-five (75) percent of the responses received reported respectful interactions between veterans and staff at St. Louis VA facilities.

### I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Yes:</b>			73.0%	67.9%	88.8%	70.7%
<b>No:</b>			27.0%	32.1%	11.2%	29.3%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	58.1%	46.6%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	16.9%	20.7%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	10.9%	13.5%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	4.4%	7.1%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	9.7%	12.1%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 186 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. The data suggests that current VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training are working as intended. However, veterans still report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Most VA employees are very respectful; however, some protocols are extremely unreasonable and are used as excuses by a few that want to be less than helpful...( ain't my job syndrome).”*
- *“Much of the staff was very rude or busy playing games on their phones.”*
- *“I have seldom seen a member of VA staff who wasn't respectful and helpful.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue efforts to educate all VA staff on the importance placed in *“I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics.”* Those employees who best display *I CARE* values deserve to be properly recognized, and those employees identified as lacking should receive additional guidance.

### VA Medical Center's Response:

*All VASTLHCS employees receive ‘I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics’ training and recommit annually. The principles of Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect and Excellence are emphasized during the training. Additionally, VA101 training is provided to all staff to help improve the Veterans’ experience in our facility. In the cases that we receive patient feedback on negative staff interactions, targeted training is delivered to those individuals to address areas of deficiency.*

## 8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

The data suggests that veterans are now more inclined to positively recommend St. Louis region VA facilities to other veterans than the previous survey period. Since the last Summary Report, willingness to recommend St. Louis VA facilities has grown from 57.3% (R5) to 66.5% (R6).

### I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Yes:</b>			69.8%	50.0%	81.5%	58.2%
<b>No:</b>			30.2%	50.0%	18.5%	41.8%
<b>Strongly Agree:</b>	44.3%	36.9%				
<b>Mostly Agree:</b>	22.2%	20.4%				
<b>Neutral:</b>	11.7%	12.3%				
<b>Mostly Disagree:</b>	4.0%	9.6%				
<b>Strongly Disagree:</b>	17.7%	20.7%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this statement with 165 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:

- *“The facility is clean. The staff offer their help to find my way around to my appointment. The signs are helpful. The medical staff, nurses, and other staff are courteous and efficient. They are very professional. They allow time for questions and concerns. They help to make my stay pleasant because they have a sense of humor and are understanding of my needs. They make my stay pleasant with positive attitudes and respect.”*
- *“This was my first experience with VA and after everything I've heard and read I was expecting the worse: long waits for an appointment, employees who aren't helpful or pleasant, unorganized and dirty. I was wrong on every count. It was one of the better medical experiences I've ever had. I think I went there 3 times. I don't understand why the VA, at least St. Louis, gets such a bad rap. They are great. It actually feels like one big family.”*
- *“I've been in the VA system since 1998, and I've found the care to be not only equal to what I've encountered through a private system, but in many ways superior. I had a heart attack in October, 2015, and I have no thanks to supernatural being, but to the outstanding care of the cardio team at JC.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“I disagree with this statement, because the providers at the St. Louis VAMC tend to lack compassion, empathy, and the skill of giving good patient service.”*

- *“I wouldn't recommend a vet use VA services unless they have someone to watch and not hesitate to speak up when things aren't right.”*
- *“It is better than nothing and some of the doctors and staff really do try. Overall the ability to take care of you is there, it is just difficult to get.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue present efforts that give quality of care and customer service priority of place in the St. Louis VA Healthcare System.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The VASTLHCS is committed to delivering the highest quality of care, with the best customer service, to our Veterans. We will continue to work on improving our Veteran satisfaction and experiences. Additionally, we continue to strengthen our relationship with local academic affiliates to also facilitate Veterans’ care in the community.*

**9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse**

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

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

	R6 (current)	R5	R4	R3	R2	R1
<b>Excellent:</b>	52.8%	39.7%				
<b>Above Average (Good):</b>	13.7%	25.6%				
<b>Average/Fair:</b>	14.5%	15.8%				
<b>Below Average:</b>	6.8%	8.6%				
<b>Poor:</b>	12.1%	10.3%				

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this question with 165 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and high quality care. Conversely, 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:

- *“My doc treats me like a person and not a number as in some of the places you go in the VA system.”*

- *“I left the clinic feeling positive and relieved of any initial anxiety. Since the doctor and nursing staff took time to answer my questions, I was satisfied with the answers they gave and the care I was given.”*
- *“They don’t listen or try to help any more than just enough.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The VASTLHCS recognizes staff members who show I CARE values through several mechanisms. As we receive compliments from Veterans, family members, or other stakeholders, the named staff are recognized at the Facility Morning Report and given an I CARE certificate in a public forum. Appropriate staff are also recognized through a weekly Civility Star program, whereby staff can nominate other staff members whom they believe display the I CARE values.*

**10. Overall experience at the VA facility**

Since the last report, satisfaction with overall experience at St. Louis VA facilities has risen slightly. The VA Medical Center’s continued focus on respect and communication through the “I-CARE” Program appears to be improving veterans’ overall experiences.

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

	<b>R6 (current)</b>	<b>R5</b>	<b>R4</b>	<b>R3</b>	<b>R2</b>	<b>R1</b>
<b>Excellent:</b>	31.5%	22.7%	26.2%	24.5%	39.7%	29.1%
<b>Above Average (Good):</b>	24.2%	28.6%	26.2%	20.8%	32.1%	13.9%
<b>Average/Fair:</b>	19.8%	21.9%	22.9%	15.2%	11.5%	23.4%
<b>Below Average:</b>	11.3%	12.6%	11.6%	20.8%	7.7%	17.1%
<b>Poor:</b>	13.3%	14.3%	13.1%	18.9%	9.0%	16.5%

Two hundred forty-eight (248) responses were received to this question with 138 indicating “Excellent” or “Above Average” overall experiences at St. Louis VA facilities; sixty-one (61) reported “Below Average” or “Poor” overall experience.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“No complaints...my expectations met on every visit.”*
- *“The pharmacists, and the pharmacy dept. is Awesome... The staff is amazing and always trying to help you out. The Mental Health dept. is the same. My Dr. and the receptionist is awesome... the travel pay people are nice and the valet guys are amazing....”*

- *“For the most part the employees here have very disrespectful attitudes, the care is subpar, and the facility is mediocre.”*

**Recommendation:** Continue to build on improvements with patient experience by implementing recommendations found in the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP). Ensure that stakeholder feedback and veterans’ concerns are at the forefront of all efforts by the St. Louis VA Healthcare System.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The VASTLHCS values our relationships with Veterans and our community. We have increased the use of Veteran Town Halls to share information and hear directly from our Veteran population. Additionally, we have created a MyVA Community Advisory Board. This initiative brings a diverse group of stakeholders together to improve the Veterans’ experiences while accessing 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:

- *“The people who set up the appointments do not look at the claim close enough to understand all the departments that you need visit. It would be nice to make one trip to visit the providers on one/two days. I have to take sick days at work and still do not complete all my appointments and have to yet file another claim for the same issues.”*
- *“Be able to see the doctor sooner. Answer the darned telephone...”*
- *“More women's restrooms would be helpful. When one is closed for repairs or cleaning, it would be helpful to have directions to the next nearest one.”*
- *“Hire more doctors and nurses.”*
- *“The parking can be quite challenging; signage to various departments could be more explicit. Nothing big.”*
- *“Veterans that express concerns with particular clinics and staff, be taken seriously and not pushed off as the veterans’ fault; better accountability; someone should review the clinics operation, ensuring that the taxpayers and veterans are getting what services they are entitled to and deserve.”*
- *“Too long in ER. Slow answering phone and always on hold and being transferred.”*
- *“I realize the VA facilities are old and outdated, but they do the best they can. Up until now I had no problems with the VA treatment; but recently it seems things are going downhill as far as communication.”*
- *“Keep all restrooms and common/waiting areas clean.”*
- *“Update the equipment that is in the offices, it looks very out dated.”*
- *“More - PROMPT SCHEDULING!”*



### 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 St. Louis region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. One hundred eighty-three (183) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' 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:

- *“All the areas I visited, on a Sunday evening we're equally good. I certainly am not used to praising the VA Medical Centers Staff. I don't go in much because of bad experiences in the past, but I can honestly say they were there for me when I needed medical attention. Thanks, Senator McCaskill.”*
- *“Adult mental health at Jefferson Barracks and the overall staff at the Washington cdoc.”*
- *“Both Dental Clinic at Cochran and the Eye Clinic and Jefferson Barracks.”*
- *“The PTSD clinic and the TBI clinic, including Dr. G and Dr. M have been exceptional. Both have taken time to get to know me as a person and seem to have a vested interest in seeing me return to my status quo. I've come a long way since being treated by them.”*
- *“Dr. DK, PTSD Clinic therapy group leader is a compassionate, talented facilitator of walking wounded combat Vietnam veterans despite not being a veteran.”*
- *“NR in the Primary Care Clinic does a great job, is caring and interested in her patients, takes the time for a proper exam, and always has a smile. The support staff in the clinic is also very competent, proactive, and helpful without having to be asked.”*
- *“Dr. M. is no other word other than amazing can describe this Doctor. He will do anything to help out, he explains himself, he talks about the challenges I have and works with me... I feel that he honestly cares for me and wants to understand me and wants to find any way that he can make me better.”*

- *“The unsung heroes at that medical center are the valet's!!!! They are amazing. Friendly and helpful. Always smiling whether it is raining or sunny, cold or miserably humid!!!! I could write a paragraph on these guys and how great of a job that they do. No matter if I am running late or on time, they are very helpful and never ever complaining... they just get stuff done.”*
- *“Senator - I can't overemphasize that there are three individuals who probably don't get the kudos they should. I've already mentioned M. Then there's B (who takes everyone's vitals before the doctor sees them). I've been seen at dozens of VA clinics and hospitals and I can't explain it, but the St. Charles CBOC has some of the best professionals I've seen. Yes, they are just as busy and stressed as the other clinics, but M and B are probably the reason why so many Veterans like the St. Charles CBOC. Senator McCaskill, if you receive similar feedback from other Veterans (or not), I recommend that B and M be recognized, not because I like them, but because they set a standard for the VA that runs contrary to what many of us see in the newspapers and on TV.”*
- *“Nursing staff in ICH and nursing home unit—very professional; x-ray staff is very good and caring; dentist D is great as is her assistant. GU doctors and residents are the BEST! Overall this VA is outstanding!!”*

**Recommendation:** The men and women of the St. Louis VA Healthcare System provide superior levels of care for our nation’s veterans. Their dedication, compassion, and professionalism deserve our praise and respect; efforts should continue to recognize those who best represent the St. Louis VA Healthcare System.

### **VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The VASTLHCS recognizes staff members who show I CARE values through several mechanisms. As we receive compliments from Veterans, family members, or other stakeholders, the named staff are recognized at the Facility Morning Report and given an I CARE certificate in a public forum. Appropriate staff are also recognized through a weekly Civility Star program, whereby staff can nominate other staff members whom they believe display the ICARE values.*

*Jai Park, MD was recognized by Paralyzed Veterans of America and presented the 2016 PVA Speedy Award. This award is presented annually to individuals who have made significant contributions to improving the lives of America’s paralyzed Veterans. Dr. Park has served veterans with Spinal Cord Injury & Dysfunction throughout her entire 35 year tenure with VASLHCS. Her peers recognize her as a leader in health care and a model VA medical staff member. She is one example of the outstanding staff who serve our Veterans at VASTLHCS.*



## 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.

### **Amount of time to be seen by a provider from the date requesting the appointment**

In the fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*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*" in response to veterans' concerns about personnel shortages as it related to apparent delays in scheduling appointments. What is the current status on the number of vacancies at the St. Louis VA Medical Center, and what steps are being taken to improve the recruiting and hiring process?

### **VA Medical Center's Response:**

*Over the past 3 years, the VASTLHCS has hired more than 550 additional staff (above and beyond filling vacated positions). So far in fiscal year 2016, we have hired over 300 staff, which includes both vacated and additional positions. The use of hiring fairs has significantly helped our recruiting efforts in targeted positions.*

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

In the fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*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.*" in regard to recommendations made to improve communication by the VA staff with the veteran. What is the current status of the shared decision-making initiative?

### **VA Medical Center's Response:**

*We have completed our shared decision-making initiative. It has been incorporated into our formal process. Attending physicians now train residents to ensure all practices are followed.*

### **Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility**

In the fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "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." What other types of initiatives has Secretary McDonald established to maintain the veteran at the center of all decision- making at the VA?

### **VA Medical Center's Response:**

*In the past year, Secretary McDonald has initiated a Leaders Developing Leaders (LDL) program that is a cascading training program, geared towards focusing on the Veteran in all aspects of the VA decision-making process. He personally gave the training to senior VA leaders, who in turn trained VASTLHCS Executive Leadership. The Executive Leadership has since trained the VASTL HCS Service Chiefs and leaders, who in turn will train their staff of managers and supervisors over the next couple of months.*

### **Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans**

In the fifth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "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." What is the current status of the quarterly town halls, and how has the feedback gained from these town halls been used to improve the quality of care and experience veterans receive at the St. Louis VA Health Care System?

**VA Medical Center's Response:**

*The VASTLHCS has embraced the use of Town Halls as a method of sharing concerns and speaking directly to VA leaders. We have held 4 quarterly Veteran town halls over the past year, at various locations across the metropolitan area. There were 2 additional town halls held in Troy, MO at the request of a large group of Veterans who meet weekly there. Frequent or repeated health care topics include use of kiosk, care in the community, and scheduling of appointments. The common themes are discussed with managers and often shared with system design teams. Other items are added to the agenda topics for future Town Hall meetings. Most recently we invited a non-VA care manager to attend the meeting and provide updated informational handouts for Veterans.*



## CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the St. Louis region is making progress with regard to customer service at the St. Louis 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 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' customer service experiences at the St. Louis 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. Specifically, I am encouraged by the implementation of the MyVA Community Advisory Board, kiosk checkout questionnaires and the leadership training initiatives. These efforts demonstrate the St. Louis VA's ongoing steadfast commitment to providing superior care and customer service to our veterans.

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, Lowry Finley-Jackson, and Betty Gonzales.