



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

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

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2014 – COL – 02



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



Columbia Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

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

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

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

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

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



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CLAIRE McCASKILL
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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 23, 2014

To the Director of the Columbia Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the Columbia Veterans Affairs Medical Center, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Columbia region. When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I meant it then, and I mean it now. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the strong satisfaction ratings of VA facilities in the Columbia region. These results confirm my belief that we are maintaining a high rate of veterans' confidence in the Columbia region VA Medical Center.

I commend the VA administrators, employees and staff for their service and professionalism. I know they want to continue striving for improvements to ensure veterans have nothing but positive experiences while at Missouri VA medical centers. In this second summary report, Missouri veterans, again, give strong satisfaction ratings to the Columbia VA Medical Center. Since our last survey, the Columbia VA Medical Center has shown improvement in four of our eight response categories while maintaining or slightly improving its already high marks in the other four categories. However, respondents still note some room for improvement with their overall experiences at the facility. It appears that the leadership at the Columbia VA Medical Center recognizes 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 appreciate the help and support from my partners at the Columbia Region VA and several Missouri veterans' organizations. Most importantly, I appreciate 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 the heart of our state.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Claire McCaskill", with a large, stylized initial "C" and "M".

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Corey Husak
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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 Columbia region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans visiting VA medical centers in other regions of the state were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about Columbia VA medical centers through the period ending May 1, 2014. Comments after that period will be reviewed in the next summary report.

The objectives of our review were to:

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

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

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

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

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

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders and the Columbia 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 Columbia region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending May 1, 2014. In the Columbia region, 285 veterans initiated the survey, and 251 of those veterans completed most or all parts of the survey during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed and partial 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, Mizzou Student Veterans Association, Disabled American Veterans, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

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

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans' service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp. Veterans self-reported their customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans' service organization or to Senator McCaskill's office that was then entered into the database.

All survey responses were carefully reviewed and selected for inclusion in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the question. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken into consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments not having as significant a level of relevance to the question asked, being repetitive 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 May 1, 2014. During this period, 285 veterans initiated the survey, and 251 of those veterans completed most or all parts of the survey for the Columbia region. Over eighty-one percent (81%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the Harry S. Truman VA Medical Center in Columbia. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Harry S. Truman VA Medical Center	81.5%
Fort Leonard Wood Clinic	3.9%
Kirksville Clinic	0.4%
Jefferson City Clinic	5.4%
Lake of the Ozarks Clinic	2.7%
Mexico Clinic	3.5%
Sedalia Clinic	1.2%
St. James Clinic	1.5%

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 50.8% of the respondents. Some veterans indicated they served in multiple eras of service. Below is a table which details the service eras of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	1.9%
Korean War	7.0%
Vietnam War	50.8%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	26.2%
Iraq/Afghanistan	20.8%

Other	15.8%
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These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Columbia VA Medical Center. Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans reported using the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	44.2%	Emergency Room	9.6%	Extended Care	3.6%
Outpatient Clinic	23.1%	Mental Health Services	22.3%	Dental	9.6%
Pharmacy	16.7%	X-Ray	19.5%	Laboratory	33.1%
Travel/Enrollment	11.2%	Main Lobby	17.5%	Specialist Visit	25.1%
Inpatient Care	7.2%	Women's Clinic	1.2%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	1.2%
Prosthetics	5.6%	Podiatry	5.6%	CHAMPVA	0.4%
Other	22.7%	(examples: Senior Veterans Clinic, Dermatology, Cardiology)			

Review of survey question results

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

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

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

Were you able to schedule your appointment easily?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	85.2%	82.9%
No:	14.8%	17.1%

Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 214 veterans stating they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. Although the vast majority of the veterans were pleased with the ease of scheduling their appointments, the veterans who indicated they were having trouble with making appointments stated most of their issues relate to the amount of time in advance an appointment needs to be scheduled in order to be seen by their doctor.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Appointments are scheduled months in advance. I receive migraines at a moment’s notice which can also cause transient ischemic amnesia. I cannot drive.”*

- *“Availability of appointments at the Columbia VA Center are hard to come by. It may take weeks to get into your primary care doctor should you get sick between your scheduled 6 month appointments.”*

Recommendation: Try to reduce the amount of time in advance that an appointment needs to be scheduled. Prioritize the most serious and time-sensitive conditions. If a scheduling delay occurs, front line staff should communicate this necessary information to the veteran in a timely manner.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Every effort is taken to assure compliance with the VHA directive concerning scheduling appointments. Nationwide audits of this VAMC and all other VAMCs were conducted to assure this compliance. Communication with Veterans is a key component in the process. We strive to meet the needs of Veterans as well as the national performance standards. A variety of different factors affect the success of these efforts. Currently, a large number of our established patients can obtain an appointment within 14 days of their desired date. We are working on action plans for our Strategic Plan’s timeliness goal that will help us meet an objective to provide more same-day, face-to-face acute care appointments. Our Emergency Department is available 24/7. For any acute medical needs, Veterans are encouraged to contact their PACT teamlet to arrange for care.

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

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

Were you able to find your way to your appointment easily?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	97.6%	97.6%
No:	2.4%	2.4%

Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 245 veterans stating they did not have a problem finding their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. This data suggest that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help veterans navigate the VA facilities.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Someone walked me to each room.”*
- *“Only because I have had to use the VA for years.”*

Recommendation: Continue having greeters meet patients and ensure staff offers assistance to patients needing directions. Make maps of the hospital available for patients to view to guide them to their appointments.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The facility's Ambassador Program in which employees spend an hour every two weeks in the main lobby to assist with way finding will continue. Efforts are underway to fill every time slot in this extracurricular activity. We can and will devise an updated, simplified version of a facility map to aid our Veterans.

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

The reported respect shown at Columbia VA facilities increased for this round of surveys. Nearly 90% of respondents reported that they are receiving the respect they feel they deserve during their VA medical experience.

Were you treated with respect while at the VA facility?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	89.6%	87.8%
No:	10.4%	12.2%

Two hundred and fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 225 veterans stating they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. While there were a few instances where veterans reported apathetic treatment by unspecified VA staff, there appears to be an overall culture of respect at the Columbia VA Medical Center with some room for improvement.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"They don't review my medical history before my appointment; They don't understand my concerns; they don't take any ownership of my care; and they 'check the box' and send me away."*
- *"They are very professional folks and I thank them for their wonderful care, concern and help!"*

Recommendation: Continue to reinforce the culture of respect and high quality customer service through regular training and frequent reminders to staff. Continue to develop and share a set of customer service principles that every VA employee should practice when interacting with veterans on a daily basis. Continue to recognize staff who show exceptional care when dealing with veterans. Make sure that patients are aware that they may go to the Truman VA's Patient Advocate to express their concerns.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Respect is one of the I CARE core values. Regular training and frequent reminders help strengthen our performance. Modified training for new employee orientation and service staff meetings focuses on broadening the customer service message to be more inclusive of the diverse groups of Veterans served and includes interactive engagement on perception. The Customer Service Board has approved a new initiative associated with the I CARE campaign by using the "Random Acts of Kindness" model. Our monthly Customer Service "Star" Award is a means to recognize exceptional customer service. Nominations are usually made by Veterans or their family members. Finally, staff members at all levels of the organization are encouraged to refer Veterans to the Patient Advocate as a resource if a Veteran's concerns/issues cannot be resolved at the lowest level.

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

The vast majority of veteran respondents, almost 90%, assigned strong communication ratings to the VA staff.

Did the VA staff communicate well with you and clearly explain what was going on?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	88.5%	87.8%
No:	11.5%	12.2%

Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 222 veterans stating the VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. Several survey respondents noted poor communication with and service received from the VA Pharmacy. However, most of the respondents reported positive communication at the Columbia VA.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Multiple and conflicting answers to the same question are common."*
- *"I still do not understand what this recent infection(s) are doing to me and am scared my health will be diminished even more."*

Recommendation: Continue to stress the importance of clear, consistent communication among all VA doctors and employees. Make sure that veterans are aware of avenues where they can go to directly express their concerns regarding their treatment. Ensure that each patient is communicated with at the level of their own understanding.

VA Medical Center's Response:

One of our Strategic Plan's most important objectives is to provide a personalized care plan that is patient-centric, addresses what is important to individual Veterans, and is communicated in a way that Veterans fully understand so that they and their families can participate more fully in their care plans. We employ the principle of shared decision making for all treatment teams. This is reinforced through Patient Centered Care training for all employees.

5. Amount of time to be seen by a provider

Veterans' wait times to be seen once they arrive for their appointments or arrive in the Emergency Room show a noticeable improvement since the last survey.

Were you able to be seen by your provider in a reasonable amount of time?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	85.3%	78.0%
No:	14.7%	22.0%

Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 214 veterans stating they were seen by their VA provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary. Overall, the current survey results suggest that veterans are being seen within a reasonable amount of time.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Amazing wait times. Best I've ever seen."*
- *"My appointment was at 8:00am and I did not see the doctor till 9:30am. The clerk at the front desk was trying to page over and over with no response."*

Recommendation: Continue to monitor wait times at the clinical level and have an action plan ready in case an issue arises at a clinic. Continue to work with doctors to reduce the length of time patients have to wait to get an appointment scheduled. Communicate with patients when there are delays, so that they have clear expectations.

VA Medical Center's Response:

We review and monitor wait times and clinic access very closely. If a clinic wait time has increased due to patient influx or loss of a provider, etc., we first try to increase our capacity by hiring more providers. If that is not feasible or takes too long, we refer Veterans to community providers and pay for those visits. We are a member of the local community health care

environment. Therefore, if there are shortages of a particular specialty in this community or with our academic affiliate, we generally experience the same shortages.

6. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans reported satisfaction in the cleanliness of the VA facilities in the Columbia region, but concerns persisted regarding the facility's normal wear and tear patterns. These appear to stem from the age of the facility.

Rate the cleanliness of the facility you visited.

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	67.3%	51.2%
Above Average (Good):	22.3%	29.3%
Average/Fair:	8.4%	17.1%
Below Average:	0.4%	2.4%
Poor:	1.6%	0.0%

Two hundred fifty-one (251) veterans responded to this question with 225 veterans stating the cleanliness of VA medical facilities in the Columbia region was Excellent or Above Average. Only five respondents rated the VA medical facility's cleanliness as Below Average or Poor.

The veterans' opinions of the cleanliness of the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region indicate that, overall, veterans are pleased with the cleanliness of the Columbia VA Medical Center during the survey period.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"It was clean and all the ladies at the front desk were pleasant and helpful. The RN that drew my blood was wonderful!"*
- *"Restroom cleanliness is sometimes lacking."*
- *"The overall appearance of the hospital was okay. It is a very old building that needs some renovations."*

Recommendation: Continue to ensure that housekeeping monitors high-traffic areas and make telephone numbers visible for veterans to call when areas need attention.

VA Medical Center's Response:

We have a master interior design plan to address concerns about aesthetics. Another planned project is to renovate restrooms in high traffic patient areas that will fully comply with ADA requirements. In addition, we are moving forward with a "way finding" project that will improve

signage and appearance of the facility. The plan is to focus the initial activities of the project on the first and second floors of the facility. Our housekeeping personnel routinely monitors high traffic areas.

7. Overall experience at the VA facility

Nearly 80% of veterans reported Above Average or Excellent experiences at the Columbia VA Medical Centers. Again, the VA's efforts since our last survey seem to have resulted in greater overall patient satisfaction. Based on the responses to our survey, improvements to the appointment scheduling process and better communication between the doctor and veteran may lead to even higher overall satisfaction with the Columbia VA medical facilities.

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

	R2 (current)	R1
Excellent:	54.0%	46.2%
Above Average (Good):	25.3%	15.4%
Average/Fair:	11.4%	23.1%
Below Average:	3.8%	7.7%
Poor:	5.5%	7.7%

Two hundred thirty-seven (237) veterans responded to this question with 188 veterans rating their experience at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region as Excellent or Above Average. Only 22 respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility as either Below Average or Poor. These numbers indicate confidence and satisfaction with veterans' overall experiences at the medical centers.

Recommendation: Continue to monitor the performance criteria the hospital already has in place to work toward continued improvement.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Performance improvement and compliance with national performance standards remain a high priority. The results of the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients (SHEP) for Veterans receiving care here are reviewed regularly by the Customer Service Board and the Joint Leadership Council. Action plans are formulated as necessary to deal with perceived issues. Likewise, the Performance Improvement Board and Joint Leadership Council regularly review the results of our overall performance in relation to national criteria.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

Veterans indicated an increased willingness to recommend other veterans to a VA medical facility in the Columbia region. Over 90% of the respondents indicated they would recommend the VA to other veterans.

Would you recommend this VA facility to other veterans?

	R2 (current)	R1
Yes:	90.3%	82.1%
No:	9.7%	17.9%

Two hundred thirty-seven (237) veterans responded to this question with 214 veterans stating they would positively recommend the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region to other veterans. Veterans who would not recommend their VA Medical Center to others had several different reasons for their responses. Their constructive responses focused on a need for improvements in customer service, quality of care or longer-than-expected wait times.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *“When I first reported to this facility for my VA physical it was one of the worst hospitals I had ever been in for care and treatment by the staff and the lack of cleanliness. I walked out of that place thinking I had been seen by a doctor and it turned out to be a nurse and one that could care less. Many years later I came there for treatment and was stunned at the turnaround in the facility, the caregivers and the overall mission of the hospital.”*
- *“My experience with the people at the VA is that they showed me more respect than I expected from anybody I knew. Most of the people that I know that work there have a special personal mission type of mindset to work with veterans.”*
- *“They have always treated me with the utmost respect and are always friendly and courteous and always answer every single question that I may have and have never rushed me out and sure made me feel comfortable, too.”*
- *“These folks are not fly-by-night professionals. Their quality of care and professionalism is commensurate with what you would find in the civilian medical establishment.”*
- *“Veterans seem to relate to each other as we wait! It’s nice to talk to other vets!”*

For those veterans who shared negative comments about the Medical Center and would not recommend them, the reasons varied.

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“I have poured my heart out to various doctors and counselors with the hope of dealing with my issues. So far no help. Probably better talking to stranger on street.”*
- *“They don’t care. They have no vested interest in my care. They talk a good game, but they don’t deliver. I’ve addressed concerns with the hospital chief of staff, the patient advocate, and tried to contact the hospital director, but the care is still disjointed with little or no continuity from one visit to the next.”*
- *“Too many patients, not enough staff.”*

Recommendation: Continue to improve the time it takes for veterans to be seen by a provider, as well as communication between veterans and medical professionals at the VA Medical Center.

VA Medical Center's Response:

As indicated above, we strive to meet compliance and performance expectations related to scheduling. We want to be an eligible Veteran's first choice for health care. This means not only sustaining the high quality of care provided and our strong customer service results, but it also means improving access to care. We currently do very well with access for primary care and mental health care. Our big focus for the year ahead will be specialty 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 made to improve the VA facility they visited.

What could be done to improve the VA facility you visited?

Two hundred thirty-seven (237) veterans responded to this question with their recommendations to improve the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. Most of the recommendations from veterans reference the same issues that have been outlined throughout this summary report. In addition, inadequate parking seems to be a concern for many.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Emergency room is very busy. It appears that they could use more assistance, but I think budgeting has them in a snafu. They did very well with the staff that they have."*
- *"More clinics open on more days, so appointments can be made easier and sooner."*
- *"When you have an appointment, you shouldn't have to wait long."*
- *"Timely communication with the veteran would go a long ways in solving some of the discontent with VA."*
- *"Parking at Truman is terrible. I would prefer not to have to use, I forget what they are called, people who park your car for you. There are not enough good, qualified doctors in the VA system period!!"*
- *"Continuity of care; I should have a one point of contact that knows my medical history, coordinates my appointments with other clinics, and ensures continuity of my medical care."*
- *"Add more services. Add more parking (a parking garage)."*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

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

There are many great professionals working in the Columbia region's VA medical facilities, and it is important they are acknowledged for their work as well. One hundred and seventy-eight (178) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region.

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

- *"The white clinic, Dr. B. and her team, have followed my care, and have supported not just me but my family throughout this ordeal. Also Prosthetics have been wonderful, fighting to get me equipment that helps me be mom, and my kids to have as normal a life as possible."*
- *"Dr. S. is an excellent doctor. In all my years of service and visits to different medical facilities he shows genuine concern and if the appointment takes longer than the allotted time he will take that time. There have been other visits that I have been seen late but am not concerned because I know he's showing another veteran the same care he shows me!"*
- *"Doctor V. and the staff at the Jefferson City VA Clinic do an excellent job. I am always referring Veterans to them."*
- *"Orthopedics. I have been treated at VA and Non-VA Orthopedics. Dr. G. and HST VA are the best."*
- *"The Silver Clinic personnel are awesome and the Pharmacy is FASSSST and the Help Desk folks are ALWAYS courteous and decent to all!"*
- *"Blue team at Columbia are great. Lab and X-ray also."*

- *“Dr. O. A., Pain management clinic. An outstanding, caring and knowledgeable physician. Also, DAV transportation coordinator, P. (last name unknown).”*
- *“Doctor A. in Pain Management is the most knowledgeable about condition. He seems to understand my condition, and is not afraid to request testing or consultation, but he can do little about the quality of the consultations with other clinics.”*

Recommendation: The Columbia VA Medical Center is fortunate to have so many competent, compassionate professionals. Reward and acknowledge superior employees for their service and job well-done. Recognize the volunteers who donate their time in the service of our veterans and make them feel like part of the VA family.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We have a robust performance evaluation system for employees and staff. Outstanding performers are recognized formally and routinely. This includes performance awards, provided funds are available. Several employee reward/recognition programs allow for employees to nominate fellow employees for recognition. We will share your recommendation with our Workforce Development Board and ask for a creative and innovative look at possible new ways to recognize, reward and retain the best among our health care professionals. VA’s Voluntary Service is the largest and oldest volunteer program in the federal government. It allows for annual awards and recognition ceremonies, which this facility has been conducting since we opened in 1972. We celebrate the fact that more than 800 volunteers provide more than 60,000 hours of service every year at this medical center. That volunteer service makes a significant difference for the Veterans we serve. Routinely, volunteers are included in facility-wide events and activities sponsored by the medical center and the Employees Association.



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 first report, or they were already taking action on some of these concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

Ease of scheduling appointments

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated *"Truman VA strictly adheres to Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Outpatient Scheduling Processes and Procedures and continuously monitors our performance. Our staff is empowered to continue to work diligently toward reduction of unnecessary waiting – either for appointments or to be seen by providers during an appointment. We are committed to providing the best health care services to Veterans served at the VA medical center in Columbia or at one of our Community Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs)."* Since the last survey, has the VA made improvements to its scheduling process to ensure that veterans receive timely care?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Improvements have been made. With the increased scrutiny and audits, we are assured of compliance with the VHA directive.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"Our Customer Service Board oversees a wide variety of activities designed to maintain our reputation for outstanding customer service. A variety of training tools have been employed over time including national VA customer service training and emphasis on the "I CARE" core values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, Excellence). Truman VA staff members are currently developing and implementing a training video entitled "Creating a Welcoming Environment."* What is the current status of both the "I CARE: VA Core Values" Program and "Creating a Welcoming Environment" Program; and what process is in place to determine their effectiveness?

VA Medical Center's Response:

As indicated, the Customer Service Board focused on I CARE core values with the development of a video, "Creating a Welcoming Environment." The video was used briefly, but, for several reasons, the Customer Service Board decided on alternative ways to enhance employee understanding of I CARE. One of those was to rely upon a previously developed video that features the personal stories of four Veterans served by Truman VA. That particular video is being used as a VISN 15 resource. Now, the Customer Service Board, in collaboration with the EEO Committee and Voluntary Service, the I CARE initiative has transitioned to a point where significant employee engagement and feedback are required. The newest I CARE initiative will focus on individual stories from Veterans that reinforce the core values. Public display of those stories along with voluntary employee engagement in the "random acts of kindness" is the next step. All of these efforts are evaluated by the overall SHEP customer service results and through feedback from regular focus groups conducted with Veterans.

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 "...As previously mentioned, our Customer Service Board oversees customer service and helps identify where communication can be improved. Membership on that board includes a Veteran, caregivers and staff. In addition, the VA Voluntary Service Advisory Committee, consisting of representatives of numerous Veteran service and community organizations meets quarterly to review the facility's volunteer program and oftentimes provides important feedback from Veterans about the services provided, customer satisfaction and opportunities for improvement." Are veterans currently aware of the avenues they have to express their concerns and feedback?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Many Veterans are fully aware of the avenues they have to express concerns and feedback. This is reinforced by various members of our staff including employee ambassadors, volunteers, providers and fellow Veterans.

Overall experience at the VA facility

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated "Truman VA is dedicated to improving customer service on a continuous and ongoing basis through the facility's Customer Service Board. As previously indicated, membership of this board includes Veterans, caregivers and VA staff. The board has the following roles and responsibilities:" and proceeded to outline them. What kinds of outcomes have come from the efforts of this Board?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Last year, four focus groups were conducted with Veterans about women Veterans, our telephone systems redesign, the caregiver support program and new employee education/orientation. Truman VA's Outreach Committee, which reports to the Customer Service Board, participated in 34 community outreach events. The board assured that customer service training was provided to all new employees and to employees participating in a local leadership development program. The board was actively represented in the facility's involvement with the Missouri Quality Award of Excellence program that included an application, site visit and review of the feedback report. Overall, the facility's customer service results remained higher than other VAMCs in VISN 15.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated *"Truman VA is committed to improving communication between Veterans and the facility. Improving the timeliness for Veterans to be seen is an ongoing process and performance measures are used to monitor the progress. In addition, Truman VA has and will continue to have regular contact with the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations (MAVO), which brings together the concerns of 22 Veterans service organizations. Representatives from Truman VA regularly attend the quarterly organization meetings to share information about medical center operations, activities and proposed changes."* Since the last survey, has the VA been able to make headway on improving the "timeliness for veterans to be seen?"

VA Medical Center's Response:

As cited earlier, a large portion of our established patients are able to be seen within 14 days in both primary care and mental health. We have added providers in certain specialty care areas. Also, the facility spent \$21 million in fee basis funds during FY 2013 to assure more timely provision of care for areas that were either oversubscribed at the medical center or were not available.



CONCLUSION

This summary report details ways the VA can improve veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities in the Columbia region. This is part of a series of steps the VA is taking to continue improving veterans' experiences at the regional VA facilities. 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 at these facilities.

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

It is clear from the surveys that there is always room to improve veterans' experiences at the Columbia VA Medical Center. The VA has provided responses which indicate that they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are continuing to implement procedures, policies and training to streamline the scheduling of appointments, address cleanliness and way-finding at the VA facilities, and improve communication with the veterans.

In order to maintain this momentum, we need to continue to work together to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue to fill out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is essential 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: Ryan Gill, Jim Plotts, Dewey Riehn, Kimberly Tatham, and Gary Powell.