



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

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

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2014 – STL – 04



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



St. Louis Region Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

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

Following a series of highly-publicized incidents in 2010 which called into question the 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 fourth 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.



Table of Contents	Page
Report	6
Scope & Methodology	7
Observation & Results	9
▪ Background	9
▪ Review of survey question results	10
1. Ease of scheduling appointments	10
2. Ease of access to the appointment location at the facility	11
3. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility	13
4. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility	14
5. Amount of time to be seen by a provider	15
6. Cleanliness of the facility	16
7. Overall experience at the VA facility	17
8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans	18
Veterans' Recommendations	20
Recognition of VA Employees	21
Follow Up	23
Conclusion	25

CLAIRE McCASKILL
MISSOURI

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 23, 2014

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 fourth Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the St. Louis Region. After reviewing the responses from this round of surveys, I am encouraged by the signs of progress being made at VA facilities in the St. Louis region. While the report suggests that veterans are having better overall experiences at the VA, we must be careful not to rest on the success of the latest round of surveys. On the contrary, it is important that we keep the momentum going until veterans are completely 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. When I 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.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports, as well as their initiative in creating an action plan for moving veterans' services forward called "Gateway to the Future." It appears that the leadership at the St. Louis VA Medical Center recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

I am grateful for the help and support of my partners at the St. Louis VA Medical Center and several Missouri veterans' organizations. But 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,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Claire McCaskill". The signature is stylized with large, fluid loops and a prominent initial "C".

Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Chris Holland
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Would you like your voice heard?

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



REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program (VCSP) survey for the St. Louis region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans visiting VA medical centers in other regions of the state were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about St. Louis VA Medical Centers 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 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, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders and the St. Louis VA Medical Center worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA medical center regarding the quality of customer service.

Scope

The scope of this review included, 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 May 1, 2014. In the St. Louis region, 405 veterans initiated the survey, and 352 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, Vietnam Veterans of America, the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

Methodology

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

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

All survey responses 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, 405 veterans initiated the survey, and 352 of those veterans completed most or all parts of the survey for the St. Louis region. Forty-three percent (43%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John Cochran VA Medical Center. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Jefferson Barracks	23.1%
John Cochran	43.0%
St. Charles Clinic	4.4%
St. Louis CBOC	3.1%
Washington, MO CBOC	1.3%
Other	25.1%

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 57.1% 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	2.6%
Korean War	6.3%
Vietnam War	57.1%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	18.9%
Iraq/Afghanistan	13.6%
Other	17.8%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the St. Louis VA Medical Center. Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans reported using the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	45.5%	Emergency Room	12.8%	Extended Care	4.0%
Outpatient Clinic	20.7%	Mental Health Services	19.9%	Dental	6.0%
Pharmacy	17.9%	X-Ray	18.5%	Laboratory	23.0%
Travel/Enrollment	8.8%	Main Lobby	11.9%	Specialist Visit	19.6%
Inpatient Care	8.8%	Women's Clinic	2.3%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.9%
Prosthetics	8.0 %	Podiatry	5.1%	CHAMPVA	0.3%
Other	31.5%	(examples: Surgery, Cardiology, Compensation and Pension exam)			

Review of survey question results

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

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	71.6%	64.2%	88.9%	74.4%
No:	28.4%	35.8%	11.1%	25.6%

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 252 veterans stating 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 noted that they were concerned with the amount of time that it took to see their doctor from the time they scheduled their appointment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Appointment was to be made for surgery on my right foot in late May 2013; I was never notified or scheduled. An inquiry was made as to why no date was set. I finally*

received a call from Surgery. No request was made by the doctor to set a date for out-patient surgery. I was given a date for January 6, 2014. A snow storm moved in the night before where I was unable to get out of my subdivision so a cancellation was made. I was rescheduled for April 14, 2014. The surgery went fine. The doctor was a great individual. I am currently recuperating.”

- *“3 calls to clinic - answering system. Asked for return call - received none. 4th call asked to stay with the operator until I made contact to request an appointment.”*
- *“They are timely, caring, and strive to make things as comfortable for their patients as possible. Since new dentists have been hired, wait times for appointments have improved.”*

Recommendation: Continue to make improvements to the scheduling system and ensure that veterans can easily access Patient Advocates and Quality Management Staff. Consider implementing an automated appointment reminder system that can notify patients before each scheduled visit.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We are committed to continually improving access for our Veterans. Veterans are reminded of appointments through several mechanisms: First, the automated telephone system places calls to the phone numbers listed in the Veterans’ electronic medical record two days before the appointment. Second, staff places calls to the Veterans on the day before an appointment for clinics that have high no-show rates or have limited capacity. Third, at check out for every visit all appointments in the next 2-3 months are printed and given to Veterans. Next, the primary care team places calls 48 hours after discharge from the hospital, to check the status of the Veteran and to ensure all appointments needed for follow up care are made. Additionally the Veteran’s primary care team makes contact with Veterans who were seen in the Emergency Room within 2 days to ensure that any appointments for follow up care are made. Lastly, through the My HealtheVet website, Veterans are able to see all appointments, engage in secure messaging with our staff and view appointment reminders sent. Veterans are encouraged to provide their current contact information, especially a working phone number and enroll in My HealtheVet.

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

Most veterans continue to report that they were able to navigate the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region in order to find the location of their appointments.

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

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	88.4%	84.9%	92.1%	90.5%
No:	11.7%	15.1%	7.9%	9.5%

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 311 veterans stating they did not have a problem finding their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. We continue to view this as a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help veterans navigate the VA facilities even while renovations continue at John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks.

Although the vast majority of veterans were able to reach their appointment site easily, the veterans who had difficulty finding their appointments indicated that their navigation was adversely impacted by the facility renovations underway.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“We were lost in the building and a nice Medical Doctor took us to the appointment lobby.”*
- *“They are moving clinics on a daily basis.”*
- *“It is conveniently located off the highway for easy access and professional staff is friendly and thorough.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts with the Medical Center’s Project Activation Team to ensure that all signage is up-to-date and the electronic monitors at the elevator banks alert veterans to the most recent changes at the Medical Center.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

FY2012 through FY2013, the medical center enacted a comprehensive way-finding project to update all exterior and interior signage at both the John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks Divisions. This initiative included deployment of detailed lobby directories as well as exterior clinic signage for way-finding improvements. Per the relocation of clinics, office, etc., the medical center retains the capability to modify the signage to ensure way-finding for veterans and/or visitors is not compromised. Additionally, a new electronic signage system with messaging boards will be installed in the summer of 2014. The previously installed system is no longer supported or functional. A solicitation and contract has been completed for the installation of the new system. Additionally, updates and information for Veterans about the medical center and its changes may be found on our Facebook page and our Internet home page at www.stlouis.va.gov.

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

The reported respect shown at St. Louis VA facilities increased for this round of surveys; however, more than a quarter of respondents still reported that they are not receiving the respect they feel they deserve.

Were you treated with respect while at the VA facility?

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	73.0%	67.9%	88.8%	70.7%
No:	27.0%	32.1%	11.2	29.3%

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 257 veterans stating they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. The data suggest that recent VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training may be working as intended. However, veterans continued to report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Support personnel are surly and indifferent. Generally, I am not greeted in any sort of personal manner. Sometimes the person doesn't even look up, but just asks for perfunctory information and says to have a seat.”*
- *“The doctors and nurse practitioner are fine as far as courtesy and friendliness, but the people who work the desks are very unfriendly and discourteous.”*
- *“The excellent staff and doctors. Also the maintenance and cleaning people. A very friendly and professional place.”*

Recommendation: Ensure that all Medical Center employees, from lobby staff to physicians, are thoroughly trained to provide courteous and efficient customer service to veterans and their families. Continue to emphasize “I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics” at all facilities. Continue rewarding employees who demonstrate superior customer service.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

All of our employees have been trained in service excellence, service recovery, and concern resolution and “I CARE VA Core Values and Characteristics” as part of new employee orientation and with follow up ongoing education. At the Director’s morning report, staff and services are recognized for the little things and the big things they do that positively impacted Veterans and their families. Letters, compliments, and recognitions are read and presented to the staff or group of staff that are identified.

4. 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 showed a significant improvement in the number of veterans who reported positive communication exchanges.

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

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	71.3%	56.4%	83.0%	63.2%
No:	28.7%	43.6%	17.0%	36.8%

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 251 veterans stating the VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. The increase in communication satisfaction suggests an encouraging shift in relations between patients and medical staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I am a Political Science major at Saint Louis University. I needed vaccination records from my VA doctor to fulfill a requirement with the school so it didn't disrupt my educational opportunity. I explained this to the doctor and was pushed around for three weeks before getting it completed. The entire time I was greeted with attitude and disrespect.”*
- *“I was unsure of the exact treatment options.”*
- *“Doctors were very professional. They asked many questions in order to prescribe the correct treatment for my problem. The doctor listened to what I had to say.”*

Recommendation: Continue the implementation of Patient-Centered Care Principles and emphasize the importance of clarity and courteousness when responding to veterans’ questions regarding their care. Ensure that veterans know how to follow up with medical staff should they have questions following their appointment.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Shared decision making is a foundational principal of the care processes and Veteran Centered Care. The Veteran is at the center and heart of the process. Their life goals, desires, and their engagement are the basis for our care planning. Each Veteran is to leave each encounter feeling as though their needs and desires were heard, they understand their current health status and they were provided options to improve their health. These options may not necessarily include what the Veteran exactly requested, but it will be consistent with established clinical practice guidelines and focused on promoting and improving their health and wellbeing. Each care team

has care managers that assist Veterans with any follow up needs or questions. Primary care team places calls 48 hours after discharge from the hospital to check on the Veteran's status, review their discharge instructions, medications and to ensure all appointments needed for follow up care are made along with reviewing any other upcoming appointments. Additionally the Veteran's primary care team makes contact with Veterans who were seen in the Emergency Room within 2 days to ensure that any appointments for follow up care are made. Lastly, through My HealtheVet website Veterans are able to see all appointments, engage in secure messaging with our staff and view appointment reminders sent. Veterans are encouraged to provide their current contact information, especially a working phone number and enroll in My HealtheVet.

5. Amount of time to be seen by a provider

The percentage of veterans expressing that they were not seen by their provider in a reasonable amount of time has decreased sharply during this survey period, and this seems to indicate that the VA Medical Center is doing a better job scheduling appointments throughout the day.

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

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	74.4%	62.3%	85.4%	68.7%
No:	25.6%	37.7%	14.6%	31.3%

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 262 veterans stating they were seen by their VA provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Veterans who reported a longer-than-expected wait time attribute the problem to low staffing levels at VA facilities.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Took over an hour before eye doctor showed up, said she was covering for another Dr.”*
- *“We had scheduled appointments, but not with our doctors.”*
- *“I am a Category 1 Veteran and have full access to whatever medical care I need. But I also carry full non-VA health insurance through my wife's employment. This is primarily due to the fact that I can be seen same-day if I'm really sick and want to see a nurse or doctor. But outside the timing of when I can schedule appointments, the VA is just as good, and better in many respects, than the private sector.”*

Recommendation: Continue filling vacancies in a timely manner to help reduce wait times and to increase the Medical Center's capacities in critical areas.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Ensuring that professional and competent staff are available to serve our Veterans is a priority for all services. Our focus is on having the right person, in the right job, with the right skill set and competencies to provide the highest quality and safe care, treatment and service. In 2013 168 net staff were added and so far in 2014, 110 net staff have been added. It is anticipated that by the end of 2014 the total number of staff at the Medical Center will increase by 358 compared to 2012.

6. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans continued to report progress in the cleanliness of the VA facilities in the St. Louis region. While concerns stem from the facility's age and normal wear and tear patterns, the percentage of veterans rating cleanliness as Below Average or Poor was lower than on the first summary report.

Rate the cleanliness of the facility you visited.

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

Three hundred fifty-two (352) veterans responded to this question with 222 veterans stating the cleanliness of VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region was Excellent or Above Average. Forty-four respondents rated the VA medical facilities' cleanliness as Below Average or Poor.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Overall, the facility is aging and does not seem clean or modern."*
- *"Bathrooms need attending more because needing toilet paper and the towels were out."*
- *"I was at JB on the 8th and John Cochran on the 9th and found both to be very clean for what they do. Also the Washington CBOC."*

Recommendation: Continue to have housekeeping monitor high-traffic areas for cleanliness, paying special attention to main entrances and restrooms. Also, designate control points throughout the VA medical facility that veterans can go to notify staff of areas that need attention by housekeeping.

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Environmental Management Service (housekeeping) is proud of the service they provide to our Veterans and families. Ninety-five percent (95%) of the housekeeping staff are Veterans themselves. They take pride in serving other Veterans through their environmental sanitation program. Their efforts are a strong contribution to the very low rates of health care acquired infections that are seen at our facility. The men and women of the Environmental Management Service are the first line of defense for an infection free and safe environment for our Veterans to receive their care in. Daily staff are assigned to monitor public bathrooms to ensure they are adequately supplied and clean for use. If at any time Veterans or visitors identify a need, they should notify a staff member or call the number posted on the mirror in the bathroom.

7. Overall experience at the VA facility

More than 52% of veterans reported Above Average or Excellent experiences at the St. Louis VA medical facilities, which is an increase since the last summary report. 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?

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

Three hundred twenty-eight (328) veterans responded to this question with 172 veterans stating their experience at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region was Excellent or Above Average. Eighty-one respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility as either Below Average or Poor.

Recommendation: Continue to implement the recommendations of the veterans' advisory group, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program and VA Survey of Healthcare Experiences of Patient (SHEP) surveys to improve customer service and quality of care at all VA facilities.

VA Medical Center's Response:

Improving customer satisfaction is part of our continuous improvement program. Teams across the facility are working on specific improvement strategies. Some examples are: 1) Service Level Liaisons – these are individual in the individual services that been identified and trained to address and resolve Veterans concerns and complaints. Veterans will soon find their picture and contact information posted in each location of care. 2) Telephone Care Collaborative –

these individuals have been improving the telephone call process by answering live calls within 30 seconds and achieving first call resolution. 3) Primary Care Team Integration – these individuals are working on improving work processes that lead to a smoother and more efficient primary care appointment.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

Veterans' willingness to positively recommend VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region to other veterans has increased since the launch of the survey in 2010. Nearly 70% of the veterans participating in this survey reported their willingness to recommend St. Louis VA facilities to other veterans.

Would you recommend this VA facility to other veterans?

	R4 (current)	R3	R2	R1
Yes:	69.8%	50.0%	81.5%	58.2%
No:	30.2%	50.0%	18.5	41.8%

Three hundred twenty-eight (328) veterans responded to this question with 229 veterans stating they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region to other veterans.

Below are sample positive comments from veterans:

- *"I want to go on record, formally, and feel free to utilize my statement, that 'The VA system here in St. Louis is outstanding.' Yes, they are overworked. No, you don't want to use the clinic for regular colds as it takes two weeks to get an appointment. But the service is outstanding, caring, and just as strong as what I get on the commercial side."*
- *"I believe I received the best possible care from caring professionals. Better than any civilian medical facility I've been to."*
- *"Doctors were very professional. They asked many questions in order to prescribe the correct treatment for my problem. The doctor listened to what I had to say. I would and have recommended the VA to VETS to get help."*

For those veterans who would not recommend VA facilities in the St. Louis region, their reasons focused mainly on a general lack of trust in the quality of care and repeated instances of frustration.

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *"Parking, Distance to services, Your Service rating dictates the type of treatment you can receive."*
- *"Not all of the people employed here are very professional. Care is mediocre at best if assigned to specific providers."*

- *“I would recommend VA care in general, but not necessarily this specific location.”*

Recommendation: Continue to build on improvements in patient care and utilize valuable assets such as community-based veterans’ groups to remain aware of any problems with care or customer service as they arise.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We have established routine communication with our stakeholders in our Veteran community and with service organizations. Through our social media sites we post information about what activities and programs are at our facility. Additionally, through these sites or by contacting the Patient Advocates, any concerns may be communicated, tracked and resolved.



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.

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

Out of the 405 surveys initiated, three hundred twenty-eight (328) veterans responded to this question with their recommendations to improve the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Most of the recommendations from veterans referenced the same issues outlined throughout this summary report.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Put in a phone system that is more reliable, or at least when you leave a message they will call you back. It would be nice to have someone answer the phone."*
- *"The one I visited last night did a great job. The VA clinics could use some work though. The doctors in the clinics take a while to get a hold of, and schedule appointments. Even when you schedule them, the actual appointment seems to always be at least a month from the day you called, unless it's your regular 6-9 month follow up."*
- *"Continue to be more customer-focused and driven to have successful outcomes, not useless metrics."*
- *"Screen employees for Customer Service skills. Also train more on the Computer System as to how to view patient history. There are many times I have to resubmit documentation and re-explain myself or tell them that it's all in the system. They either just don't want to look or are not trained enough."*
- *"There have been times I wanted a question answered but felt I got the run around. I am 80% and wanted to know more about the eye program. I did get glasses but the manager there was not helpful, he was vague in answering. Also I was supposed to get the transition lenses but when I received my glasses they were just regular lenses, not transition."*
- *"Stabilize the doctors' staff. I believe there is too much turnover!"*
- *"Add more Doctors. Improve the appointment process."*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

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

There are many great professionals working in the St. Louis region's VA medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. Out of the 405 surveys initiated, two hundred sixty-two (262) veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region.

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

- *"Yes, the Physical Therapy folks in Bldg 53 at Jefferson Barracks. Also the Pain Clinic in Bldg 52. I get a sense of care from everyone."*
- *"Dr. M.D. (Team 1) has been my primary care provider for over 20 years. She is very knowledgeable and has excellent patient care skills."*
- *"Team 5 Dr. B.H. (Hematology/GI Clinic) and PA C.C. These two really care about my health and demonstrate they care since I now see them after my liver transplant. They take very good care of me and do an excellent job."*
- *"S.R. of the Diabetes Team and B.P. of Primary Care. Both are exceptional at their jobs."*
- *"St. Louis VA Dental Associates. They have done a great job...I am very happy with the results."*
- *"Dr. S.C. is my primary care physician and she always is clear in her conversations with me. She takes plenty of time and I believe she is very thorough in her treatment of me."*
- *"The Spinal Cord Injury Service has worked with me 2011 - 2014. Every employee has treated me outstandingly. It is obvious they go to almost any extreme to help me, from inpatient to outpatient clinic visits. I cannot say enough about how much they care about me and my disabilities and how they have tried to provide excellent service to my needs! I also can say the same things about the Senior Veteran's Clinic; they take so much time to ensure my needs are met in a timely manner. The Pharmacy service has also provided me with superb service and coordinated support with these services as well. Thank you for allowing me to give these services a much-deserved 'Atta-Boy!'"*

Recommendation: The St. Louis VA Healthcare System deserves high praise for the many dedicated and compassionate professionals who care for our nation's veterans. Continue to ensure that those employees who provide superior care and customer service are properly recognized and rewarded.

VA Medical Center's Response:

We value our employees and take every opportunity to recognize the women and men who serve those who served. Staff are recognized for service excellence at the Directors Morning Report, staff recognize other staff through our CREW (Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace) awards, and by the one on one interaction with our Veterans. Weekly an I CARE story is written and shared.



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 these concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

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

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated *"The Medical Center has had difficulty in establishing a forum in which Veterans could attend and provide their feedback. In lieu of this action, the Volunteer Veteran Advisor role has been established and implemented in August 2012. These volunteers provide real time feedback to Medical Center leadership."* What is the current status of this forum for veterans to provide direct feedback and input concerning the Medical Center?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Volunteer Veteran Advisor is established and has been a valuable asset to our facility, leadership and Veterans. The Veteran Advisory Council has not been implemented due to changes in key staff members and a low number of volunteers for the Council. As part of the ongoing roll out of the Patient Center Care Program, this program will be evaluated again for implementation.

Overall experience at the VA facility

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated *"This action is still in process. A portion of the individuals to serve on the workgroup have been identified. The first meeting is anticipated in November 2011"* in reference to an idea set forth in the first report. This report stated the VA's intention to establish a workgroup comprised of veteran service officers, veterans and VA staff. What is the current status of the establishment of this workgroup?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Monthly meetings are being held with Veteran Service Officers, Veterans and VA staff. The agenda consists of updates on activities and programs at the facility, subject matter experts presenting on a topic that was requested by the group and discussion with senior leaders. Additionally a volunteer position of Veteran Advocate has been established.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated *"The VA Medical Center Veterans Advisory Council is still in the initial stages of development. Building off the success of the Mental Health Veterans' Advisory Council, a charter is in the process of being drafted. Once the charter is completed and requisite approval obtained, applications from volunteers, who wish to serve on the council, will be collected, reviewed and evaluated. It is anticipated that the council, subject to strong Veteran participation, will be operational within the next sixty (60) days."* What is the current status of the VA Medical Center Veterans' Advisory Council?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The Veteran Advisory Council has not been implemented due to changes in key staff members and a low number of volunteers for the Council. As part of the ongoing roll out of the Patient Center Care Program this program will be evaluated again for implementation.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, *"The Medical Center continues its ongoing customer service training. In 2012, it was expanded to include "I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics." In 2013, Patient Center Care Principles will be included. These principles focus on the Veteran experience and the environment that supports Veteran care."* What is the current status of the "I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics" Program, and what process is in place to determine its effectiveness?

VA Medical Center's Response:

The "I CARE: VA Core Values and Characteristics" has been implemented across the organization. Its effectiveness is measured by its outcome of high quality in the care, treatment and services and in service excellence. Point of service surveys, clinical outcome measures, customer service rating and complaints are tools used to evaluate the program.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the St. Louis region has documented apparent progress and concerns in the area of 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' experiences at the Columbia region VA facilities.

It appears that efforts to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the St. Louis VA Medical Center are yielding positive overall results. The VA has continued to provide responses that indicate they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the deficiencies that veterans have identified using the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. The implementation of a workgroup comprised of veteran service officers, veterans and VA staff who meet to review and analyze information on actions, progress and results will provide another mechanism for ensuring veterans receive the high quality customer service they are rightfully due.

In order to maintain this momentum, we need to continue to work 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.

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