

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0913

May 23, 2014

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Mr. Secretary,

We write today to express our continued concern regarding unacceptable wait times for patients to receive needed care within the Veterans Affairs (VA) Healthcare Systems. Based on recent testimony before our House Veterans' Affairs Committee, numerous news reports, and your Department's own acknowledgment, we believe that some patient backlogs have reached a level that now requires you to look for alternative solutions outside of the VA Healthcare Systems. This is now necessary to protect the health and lives of the men and women who have worn the uniform of our Armed Forces and who now rely on the VA for medical care.

Mr. Secretary, you currently have statutory authority to solve this crisis of wait times. As you know, the Non-VA Care Coordination (NVCC) program provides payment authorization for eligible veterans to obtain outpatient medical services through private community providers when VA medical facilities are not "feasibly available". We think you would agree Mr. Secretary, the current patient backlog in some VA systems indicates that VA medical services may not be "feasibly available" for many of our veterans.

Therefore, to ensure timely delivery of care, we respectfully call on you to exercise your authority and immediately change internal policies that require veterans to see their Primary Care Provider first before participating in NVCC, and additionally immediately reform the manner in which those on a wait list for follow-up medical services may go outside the VA system.

In a recent case presented to our Committee by a veteran in South Carolina, the patient had to wait approximately 11 months between his initial medical consult and his needed colonoscopy. By the time he finally received a colonoscopy, he was diagnosed with terminal stage 4 colon cancer. He, and others in his situation, rightly deserve more timely attention, and the Department has in its authority the ability to provide this timely attention by referring patients out to private sector providers. But your Department and VA hospitals must choose to better exercise that authority.

Mr. Secretary, we understand you have many institutional reforms to consider. Our Committee and the Congress are here to assist in any matter that requires changes to federal law or additional funding. However, while we each work on long-term reforms, it is critical that action be taken immediately to ensure patients are seen by medical providers in a timely manner. This doesn't require a change in law, only a change in the way your Department exercises its current authority. Easing this restriction on private sector care now, even if only temporarily to address this current emergency situation, would be a critical first step in assisting the VA Healthcare Systems reduce the current backlog of claims, and would help restore the confidence of our veterans and the American people.

Simply put, Mr. Secretary, eliminate patient waiting lists now by utilizing private sector solutions already authorized by law. The health and lives of so many veterans across the country depend on you taking swift action today.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

With much respect,



David W. Jolly
Member of Congress



Gus M. Bilirakis
Member of Congress