



Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

Summary Report:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 Medical Centers
Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks

Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program

Report No: 2018 – VHSO – 03



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



Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks Customer Satisfaction Program

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

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

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

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

This report represents the third Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report for the Southwest Missouri facilities and includes a continuing compilation of survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 25, 2018

To the Director of the Fayetteville Veterans Affairs Medical Center,
Members of the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks, and Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my third Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the Southwest Missouri region. After reviewing the responses from this survey, I am encouraged by the continued commitment of both Missouri veterans and VA officials in the Southwest Missouri region to come together for the sake of improving veterans' experiences at VA facilities. I recognize the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks' ongoing efforts to address issues regarding healthcare and customer service quality, and I hope that current and future leadership use the feedback contained in this report to identify priorities for improved customer service.

When I first proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I would not be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. I meant it then, and I mean it now. For this survey period, veterans resoundingly expressed similar levels of satisfaction with their VHSO experience, and in some cases expressed greater satisfaction in areas, such as scheduling appointments and wait times. Looking ahead, it is important that we keep the momentum going that we have established over the last few years with the robust participation among our veterans. We must sustain this timely, transparent process to ensure our veterans are satisfied with their VA health care experience. To that end, I have instructed my staff to continue working with the veterans' organizations in executing a robust outreach strategy to promote even greater participation.

I remain appreciative of the hard work and professionalism shown by the VA administrators, employees and staff. I know they are committed, as I am, to ensuring veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. I am proud of their willingness to implement many of the recommendations outlined in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Reports. It appears that the leadership at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks recognize their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and I appreciate their commitment to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

Additionally, I am grateful for the help and support of the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and Missouri veterans' organizations. However, most importantly, I am grateful to our veterans for their service, sacrifice and support for the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in Southwest Missouri.

Sincerely,



Claire McCaskill
United States Senator

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

Rylea Luckfield
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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 Southwest Missouri region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans raising specific concerns about their care or benefits were reviewed immediately 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 the Fayetteville VA Medical Center and its Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (collectively referred to as the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks or VHSO) through the period ending April 4, 2018. Comments received after that period will be reviewed in the next Summary Report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the VHSO;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the VHSO;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the VHSO;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the VHSO to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans regarding the VHSO; 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 18 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 VA Medical Center administrators 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 Southwest Missouri region and statewide locations that received a Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey through the period ending April 4, 2018. In the Southwest Missouri region, one hundred fifty-four (154) responses were received during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

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

Methodology

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

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

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

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

Limitations

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

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



OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

Background

This Summary Report covers the period ending April 4, 2018. During this period, one hundred fifty-four (154) survey responses were received in the Southwest Missouri region. In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising over sixty-two percent (62.3%) 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	1.3%
Korean War	5.2%
Vietnam War	62.3%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm	18.2%
Iraq/Afghanistan	12.3%
Other	17.6%

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their gender. One hundred fifty-four (154) responses were received to this question. Below is a table which indicates the gender composition of respondents:

Male	86.4%
Female	13.6%

In the survey, over fifty-three percent (53.8%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the Mount Vernon Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Some veterans visited multiple VA facilities. Below is a table which describes where the veterans received treatment:

Fayetteville VA Medical Center	18.8%
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Branson Clinic	27.9%
Mount Vernon Clinic	53.8%
Fort Smith, AR Clinic	0.0%
Harrison, AR Clinic	0.0%
Ozark, AR Clinic	0.0%
Jay, OK Clinic	0.0%
Springfield Vet Center	2.6%
Other	7.9%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Fayetteville VA Medical Center. One hundred fifty-four (154) responses indicated that veterans utilized services from the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	21.4%	Emergency Room	0.0%	Extended Care	1.9%
Pharmacy	9.1%	X-Ray	5.2%	Laboratory	23.9%
Travel/Enrollment	1.3%	Main Lobby	11.7%	Specialist Visit	16.2%
Inpatient Care	3.9%	Women's Clinic	0.0%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	0.6%
Prosthetics	1.3%	Podiatry	1.3%	Family Health (CHAMPVA)	1.3%
Claim & Pension Exam	2.6%	Other	32.6% (examples: Audiology, Optometry, Pulmonary, etc.)		

Review of survey question results

This section summarizes the results of each of the survey statements. Results from the most recent survey (R3) are marked “current,” and results from the previous surveys (R1 & R2) are also included. Veterans have rated their agreement with the following statements on a spectrum from Strong Agreement to Strong Disagreement.

1. Ease of scheduling appointments

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

I was able to schedule my appointment easily.

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	70.8%	59.5%	63.3%
Mostly Agree:	13.0%	20.9%	16.3%
Neutral:	7.8%	11.8%	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	1.9%	4.6%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	6.5%	3.3%	9.0%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 129 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities at VHSO. Veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments stated that most of their issues were with scheduling appointments both automatically and over the phone, as well as being unable to reach VA support staff who could schedule an appointment.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Took more than two weeks to get a primary care appt.”*
- *“Phone system is terrible. Hard to get thru to primary care system. Left message to get an appointment. Never heard back or was scheduled.”*
- *“My appointments are made when I leave my last appointment.”*

Recommendation: Continue to hire new, qualified staff and fill vacancies, especially in specialty areas and at the outpatient clinics, in order to reduce scheduling delays and changes. Review whether current scheduling practices accommodate walk-in visits efficiently, or could allow for more flexibility for veterans to choose their appointment dates and times.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

Timeliness of appointments is a top priority for the VA nationally and for Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks. Currently, new patients can be seen at the Branson, MO Outpatient Clinic in 17 days, and at the Mt. Vernon Clinic in 11 days. Once a patient is established, current wait time is only two days. We are actively using our options through the Office of Community Care to ensure Veterans are not waiting to receive their care. Additionally, we are actively recruiting providers for our southwest Missouri catchment area to ensure all teams are covered – and Veterans are able to receive care when they request it. With regard to the phone lines, the call center has been implemented and expanded, but we know that from time to time issues arise. We review our phone data on a daily basis in our morning report, as well as in a monthly meeting to address any issues that are seen with regard to timely answering of the phone lines. We are also encouraging Veterans to use our Veterans Appointment Request App, available as part of My HealtheVet, to be able to schedule a primary care appointment quickly.

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

A large majority of responses expressed strong satisfaction with wayfinding. The data suggests that veterans were able to easily navigate the VA medical facilities in the Southwest Missouri region in order to find the location of their appointments.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	76.6%	78.4%	80.7%
Mostly Agree:	9.7%	15.7%	6.0%
Neutral:	6.5%	5.2%	7.2%
Mostly Disagree:	2.6%	0.7%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	4.5%	0.0%	4.2%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 133 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that it was easy to find their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“The nurses came to get me in the waiting lobby.”*
- *“Sorry, the staff was great! Had troubles finding the back entrance for the sleep study.”*
- *“Mount Vernon was very confusing. I was unable to easily find staff when I entered the building.”*

Recommendation: Continue efforts to keep updated signage available throughout the facilities, and ensure that all veterans are aware of any detours due to any campus construction. Encourage staff and volunteers to offer assistance to patients needing directions, and continue to emphasize the importance of excellent customer service.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO is aware of the need to ensure all patients and visitors can easily find their way in our facilities. The facility at Mt. Vernon is older and may at times be confusing. Our efforts to mitigate this include having staff at the front entrance to ensure all who enter know their way or are provided with directions or an escort. These staff are also available to assist patients with the check in process. Wayfinding signage has been implemented as well. We are preparing to activate the clinic in Springfield, MO; which has a robust wayfinding sign package already installed. The clinic is also easier to navigate in general, with no stairs or multiple floors. We look forward to providing this world class facility to the Veterans in southwest Missouri.

3. Cleanliness of the facility

Veterans’ satisfaction with the cleanliness of the VA facilities, though strong, declined slightly during this survey period.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	75.3%	78.4%	75.9%
Mostly Agree:	13.6%	13.7%	15.1%
Neutral:	5.8%	5.2%	6.6%
Mostly Disagree:	2.6%	1.3%	0.6%
Strongly Disagree:	2.6%	1.3%	1.8%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 137 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region were clean. Only eight veterans strongly disagreed or mostly disagreed that these facilities were clean.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Although the newer side of the facility is modern and well maintained, surgeries are still on the old worn down side of the building with narrow halls and substandard rooms.”*
- *“They've always kept this VA clean since I've been going there.”*
- *“The furniture in the waiting areas is worn out and stained.”*

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

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, we pride ourselves on providing clean, well maintained facilities at all locations. The staff at all locations work diligently to ensure the highest quality standards with regard to cleanliness are upheld. The leads at each of our clinics help us to ensure these standards are met, and are able to either quickly resolve issues, or bring them immediately to our attention. Our partnership with the building owners has allowed us to address any concern that affects the cleanliness of the facilities. Finally, our Environment of Care process is a proactive measure we take by sending a team to each facility to inspect on a variety of measures to make sure the high standard of cleanliness is met.

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

Satisfaction with wait times improved slightly since the last survey period. While most veterans report satisfaction with their appointment times, it is clear from their feedback that it still takes more than 30 days to schedule an appointment in many cases.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	64.9%	55.6%	60.8%
Mostly Agree:	13.6%	20.3%	17.5%
Neutral:	9.7%	14.4%	10.8%
Mostly Disagree:	3.9%	5.2%	2.4%
Strongly Disagree:	7.8%	4.6%	8.4%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 121 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were able to see their provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. In some cases, veterans reported that they had to wait longer than they thought was necessary.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Ridiculous length of time. Could not transfer my files from other VA facility.”*
- *“I’m able to get an appointment for an epidural within 2-3 months & that time frame has greatly improved within the past 2 yrs. It used to take over 6 months!”*
- *“Wait time is excessive.”*

Recommendation: Continue current efforts to ensure that staff vacancies are filled in a timely manner to reduce wait times and improve patient access. Ensure that patients’ scheduling requests are responded to in 1 to 3 days from time of initial contact.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We are aware of the importance of timely appointments at all locations, and take our commitment to access very seriously. Our leadership team is proactive with regard to wait times by reviewing them on a daily basis in our morning meetings. Any areas that have lengthy wait times, or where we are seeing an increase in wait times is assessed and measures taken to address as quickly as possible. The Resources Committee actively reviews all vacancies to ensure that all vacancies are reviewed so that there are no critical positions left vacant, but in most cases once we are aware a provider is leaving, we begin the recruitment process immediately. We are proud to also offer same day access at all locations, and continue to increase our expenditures through our community care options to ensure all Veterans can be seen quickly.

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

Historically, poor communication between patients and VA personnel has been the main reason veterans and their families contact the senate office. While some veterans are still having difficulty communicating with VA staff, the data consistently shows that a large majority are pleased with the VA’s clinical communication.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	73.4%	65.4%	72.9%
Mostly Agree:	11.0%	18.3%	12.7%
Neutral:	6.5%	5.2%	7.2%
Mostly Disagree:	4.5%	4.6%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	4.5%	6.5%	5.4%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 130 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. Several survey respondents commented on unsatisfactory communication experiences with VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“After my surgery, I never saw the doctor. He did the surgery and talked only with my wife and the staff.”*
- *“Doctor spent more time typing on computer than he did talking with me.”*
- *“Everyone was very knowledgeable and helpful. Pleasant conversations with each I dealt with. Doctors and all others are real nice and always tell me what they want me to do.”*

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

VA Medical Center’s Response:

We are pleased to see that these scores have improved, but if even one Veteran has a concern, we know that our work is not done. It is the expectation that all employees provide excellent customer service in addition to excellent health care in accordance with VA’s ICARE (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence). We expect Veterans and their family members to leave every interaction feeling like they have been heard and their needs taken care of. The Interim Medical Center Director has also taken on the principles of Servant Leadership, and has formed 5 teams to spread these principles throughout the system. He has now opened the challenge to all staff; and believes these principles align well with the ICARE values, and will ensure a happy workforce, which in turn will ensure happy and satisfied customers. We are happy to work individually with a Veteran if he or she has a concern about their visit or appointment scheduling. Veterans with these or other concerns are encouraged to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

6. Receiving necessary care while at VA facility

Efficiency of care is a key indicator of strong customer service satisfaction. The data suggests that a strong majority of veterans were pleased with the VA’s healthcare efficiency, though agreement fell slightly from last year.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	64.3%	60.1%	66.9%
Mostly Agree:	13.6%	22.2%	9.0%
Neutral:	8.4%	2.0%	9.0%
Mostly Disagree:	3.9%	5.9%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	9.7%	9.8%	10.2%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 120 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they received the care they needed during their visit. Some concerns expressed by veterans related to the quality of communication with staff at the facilities and continuity of patient care.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I found the doctor concerned and careful to check all the details.”*
- *“Without Providers who are qualified and permanent full time, as a Patient there is no continuing care or chance to establish a lasting relationship.”*
- *“Everyone seemed to be in a rush, to me it felt like it was a job for them to assist me.”*

Recommendation: Increase efforts to fill vacancies for specialists to improve timely patient access to necessary services. Provide further guidance to clinical staff regarding appropriate use of appointment time and communication with patients.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, we remain committed to providing access and quality care to Veterans. When our Veterans come to see us, we expect their care to be the highest standard, and we expect staff to provide excellent customer service. We do encounter vacancies and turnover, and we work diligently to begin recruitment immediately to ensure there are no gaps in care. Some specialty positions may be hard to fill, and during those times we utilize our community care options to ensure Veterans are seen and their needs are addressed. Customer service training is something we consistently deliver to our staff through a variety of means, including the Servant Leadership initiative currently underway. All staff should demonstrate the ICARE values during every interaction. We do know that from time to time a Veteran will have concerns, and we encourage them to let us know immediately by calling our Patient Advocates at (479) 444-5047.

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

The reported respect shown at VHSO continues to be one of this region’s high scores. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of responses indicated strong satisfaction with the VHSO’s culture of respect.

I was treated with respect while at the VA facility.

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	77.3%	74.5%	75.3%
Mostly Agree:	9.7%	13.7%	11.4%
Neutral:	7.1%	2.0%	5.4%
Mostly Disagree:	0.6%	4.6%	1.8%
Strongly Disagree:	5.2%	5.2%	6.0%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 135 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region. The data continues to suggest that recent VA initiatives regarding employee customer service training may be working as intended. However, veterans still report that support staff in some instances seemed rude and disrespectful to patients.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Again every person I dealt with was open, capable, asked and answered questions.”*
- *“Dr. didn't show concern over shrinkage of left leg. Never looked at it and didn't even look at the knee brace I got through VA 2+ years ago.”*

- *“All VA personnel were outstanding. The only complaint was with the personnel that evaluated me for my disability. It was my opinion the person that evaluated me was a PA, not a Doctor.”*

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

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO is committed to the highest level of customer service and ensuring every patient, visitor, and staff are treated in accordance with the ICARE values. It is the expectation of this facility that all employees demonstrate these in every interaction with all patients, and we pride ourselves on providing outstanding customer service. The leadership team has recently started a program to award employees with ICARE certificates when they have demonstrated one or more of the core values.

8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

A majority of responses indicated a willingness to positively recommend VHSO facilities to other veterans. Nearly 80 percent (78.6%) indicated they would recommend the VA to other veterans. Since the last Summary Report, willingness to recommend VHSO facilities has remained strong but decreased slightly from 81.0% (R2) to 78.6% (R3).

I would recommend this VA facility to other veterans.

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Strongly Agree:	66.9%	67.3%	70.5%
Mostly Agree:	11.7%	13.7%	9.0%
Neutral:	11.7%	7.2%	6.0%
Mostly Disagree:	2.6%	3.9%	4.8%
Strongly Disagree:	7.1%	7.8%	9.6%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 121 strongly agreeing or mostly agreeing that they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the VHSO region to other veterans. However, concerns were noted generally related to respect shown by VA staff.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I would recommend the Mount Vernon CBOC to anyone, and I hope the future clinics in Joplin and Springfield are just as great.”*
- *“This facility has always exceeded my expectations in care and friendliness.”*

- *“The facility was very clean and had many pamphlets, giving information about benefits to all veterans.”*

Below are sample concerns from veterans:

- *“I ask too many questions and sometimes the jump onto me.”*
- *“Even though there is a VA Choice program, VA doesn't really recognize the program and makes it difficult to get treatment needed.”*
- *“Find staff that care.”*

Recommendation: Continue to provide resources to Patient Advocates and Voluntary Services so veterans feel they have a place to voice their concerns and feel confident that those concerns will be addressed. Continue efforts that support customer service and patient-centered care.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

While most of our Veterans report they are highly satisfied, it is important to us that every Veteran is highly satisfied. Since the last survey, we are proud to announce that we have added an additional Patient Advocate to assist in addressing concerns brought forward by Veterans and their family members. Our Voluntary Service Chief retired after many years, and the replacement was brought on and has hit the ground running. He has already shown his commitment by addressing some Veteran concerns through partnership with our Veteran Service Organizations. We have also made changes to the structure in our Office of Community Care, and have seen improvements in many areas including timeliness, employee satisfaction, and customer satisfaction. We strongly encourage Veterans with any concerns to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.

9. Overall experience with personal doctor or nurse

A veteran’s confidence in his/her personal doctor or nurse is key to evaluating overall customer service experience. Since the last report, veterans’ satisfaction with their physician or nurse has remained strong but decreased slightly at just under 80 percent (79.9%). The data suggests that medical staff is working hard to maintain high quality veterans’ health care experiences, but additional efforts should be made for continued improvement.

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Excellent:	68.2%	65.4%	65.7%
Above Average:	11.7%	15.0%	15.1%
Average/Fair:	5.8%	8.5%	9.0%
Below Average:	5.8%	3.9%	4.2%

Poor:	8.4%	7.2%	6.0%
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One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this question with 123 reporting “Excellent” or “Above Average” experiences with their personal doctor or nurse. Veterans who described positive experiences frequently commented on clear and empathetic communication and high quality care.

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“Very professional and dedicated.”*
- *“My Dr. and Nurse try to get to the problem instead of throwing drugs at me.”*
- *“Presently, the gentleman/doctor that is in charge of my primary care seems to be with the program better than any to date. Again, the above recommendation above is only for this new doctor and for the year 2018 and not related to any other experiences I’ve encounter in past years.”*

Recommendation: Continue to recognize those staff members who demonstrate outstanding care to veterans. Also, continue efforts aimed at providing continuity of care and minimizing staff turnover.

VA Medical Center’s Response:

The monthly Employee Town Hall and awards ceremony are a regular mechanism that we use to recognize employees for their hard work and dedication to our mission. Years of service awards, great catch awards, Employee of the Month, patient compliments, and other means of recognition are made during this venue. The Interim Medical Center Director travels to the CBOC’s in our catchment area to conduct Employee Town Hall and Awards Ceremonies there as well – making sure that staff in the CBOC’s are recognized. The Interim Medical Center Director has also implemented “Thankful Thursday” to use another opportunity to recognize staff and thank them for their work.

10. Overall experience at the VA facility

The VA Medical Center’s continued focus on respect and communication through the “I CARE” Program appears to be effective at maintaining steady satisfaction with veterans’ overall experience. However, it should be noted that satisfaction has decreased a small amount from 73.9% (R2) to 71.4% (R3).

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

	R3 (current)	R2	R1
Excellent:	47.4%	48.4%	51.2%
Above Average:	24.0%	25.5%	22.3%

Average/Fair:	12.3%	11.1%	14.5%
Below Average:	6.5%	10.5%	3.6%
Poor:	9.7%	4.6%	8.4%

One hundred and fifty-four (154) responses were received to this statement with 110 indicating that their overall experience with VA Medical Centers was “Excellent” or “Above Average.” Twenty-five (25) respondents rated their experience at the VA medical facility as either “Below Average” or “Poor.”

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *“I have received quality healthcare with little hassle for the past 8-9 years. I do feel that primary care often lacks training or experience with female patients.”*
- *“I have found the VA to provide better care than the private medical system.”*
- *“I have gone through 5-6 Primary Team Doctors since Dec 2014. Some I've only seen "ONCE" some "TWICE" before there's another one. The doctor I have now is leaving. So.... who knows...?”*

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

VA Medical Center’s Response:

At VHSO, it is important to us to hear any concern or suggestion from our Veterans and stakeholders. We have a variety of mechanisms to receive feedback such as through our Patient Advocate Office, Community Town Halls, Monthly One-On-One with the Director meetings, Veterans Voices Advisory Councils, meetings with Veteran Service Officers, coalition groups, and other means. We have been able to act on many issues due to the feedback we have received, and we will continue to strive to ensure all concerns are heard and acted upon where possible. We have also incorporated Veteran representatives on a number of councils and committees, including our Executive Leadership Board. The feedback from this has been very helpful to leadership to address a number of issues. As an example, we recently re-invigorated our shuttle program at the Fayetteville campus as a result of this relationship. We look forward to the continued partnership.



VETERANS' RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Below are sample comments from veterans:

- *"Hire more staff and work to retain them."*
- *"Market the My HealthVet app to more veterans and provide more education."*
- *"Improve automatic phone service. Sends you to wrong place. Long waits."*
- *"There was no area for those in wheel chairs waiting for appointments - they had to wait in aisles and near doors."*
- *"Treat all patients the same whether they use their VA doctor or using a personal doctor."*
- *"More modern facilities, however, they provide exceptional care. With little reservation, I would use that facility staff; expand services."*
- *"Better Parking. Other than that, they have been remodeling and improving the facility every time I have been there for the last 3 years. They literally have saved my life twice."*
- *"Expand services to include emergency room facility."*
- *"Improvements in customer service are much needed."*



RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONALISM OF VA EMPLOYEES BY VETERANS

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

There are many great professionals working in VHSO medical facilities, and it is important to acknowledge their hard work and dedication. One hundred fifty-four (154) responses were received to this question acknowledging veterans' appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the Southwest Missouri region.

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

- *"Dr. K., my primary Care physician."*
- *"Team 10, Mount Vernon. Dr. A.D., Dr. M.B., Fayetteville"*
- *"Dr. S. and her staff of Team 12"*
- *"N.P. - She's my primary care provider on Team #10 at the Mt Vernon, MO VA. She's Always read through my records to refresh her memory on my health background prior to seeing me."*
- *"Since it was my get acquainted (1st) visit. My team is #8 and they made me feel like I was in good hands. They did labs and I spent a long time talking to the PA, I didn't feel rushed at all."*
- *"Branson VA Medical Clinic eye clinic and doctor are excellent, as is Dr. C."*
- *"Mental health – T.H. has been a major force in my recovery of alcoholism and care of my major depression disorder issues. Thanks to her, I can say that I'm alive and loving my life once again."*
- *"So many departments do well. If I were to choose one, it would definitely be Dr. C.M., VAMC Fayetteville, AR and her Team in the Mental Health Department. They are helpful beyond any required dedication."*

- *“Dr. D. is very thorough and quickly follows up. The radiology tech that did my procedure is always very friendly. He explains what he is doing and what he is looking for, and does it in plain English!”*
- *“Dr. P. in the eye clinic is super and is always professional and detailed in her care.”*

Recommendation: Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks 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 know that happy and satisfied employees will provide a level of customer service that will ensure satisfied patients. On the most recent All Employee Survey results, the “Best Place to Work” scores were significantly improved, and we hope to keep this trend going in the next survey by listening to our employees and providing a safe environment for them to bring concerns forward. In addition to the ICARE certificates, Thankful Thursday, leadership rounding, Town Hall recognitions, and other means currently in place; we have increased our efforts to include front line staff in committees, programs, meetings, and decision-making processes to obtain their valuable feedback and to make them feel a part of the process. We look forward to the roll out of the Servant Leadership principles to engage our employees further.



FOLLOW UP ON VA MEDICAL CENTER'S RESPONSES

Since the first Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center agreed to act on a number of the recommendations outlined in the previous reports, or they were already taking action on some of the concerns mentioned in the summary. This section reports the status of the implementation of those commitments.

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

In the second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*VHSO does review wait times on a continual basis to ensure that Veterans are not waiting for their appointments. We offer the Choice Program and have increased our numbers of Provider Agreements to coordinate care in the community if we cannot provide the care within 30 days or when that specific care is needed. Our Resources Committee has been re-designed and is reviewing all vacancies so that there are no critical positions left vacant.*" in response to veterans' concerns about personnel shortages as it related to apparent delays in scheduling appointments. How does the Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks work to prevent staff turnover, and what strategies are in place to accommodate veterans when there are staff vacancies?

VA Medical Center's Response:

Both nursing and physician pay panels are completed across the health care system to ensure that salaries are adjusted to be competitive with the private sector. In addition to the benefits, work environment, noble mission, and salary offered by the VA, we make every attempt locally to engage our staff and hear their concerns so that they can be addressed. We have made significant strides with our labor partners at AFGE Local 2201 to partner on a variety of issues and work together to put systems and processes in place that make this the best place to work for staff. Our 2017 All Employee Survey Results show significantly improved scores in this area over the prior year; and our efforts will continue to ensure staff satisfaction and retention are high.

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

In the second Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, "*If there is any situation where a patient cannot be seen in 30 days, they qualify to be seen via the Choice Program. We encourage anyone who is being told otherwise to contact Patient Advocate's to have their situation reviewed immediately. When necessary, we have also used extended hours to ensure Veterans are seen. We remain very committed to timely access, and even offer same day access at all locations. We expect every employee to demonstrate the ICARE Values (Integrity, Commitment, Advocacy, Respect, and Excellence) during every interaction. Veterans with these or other concerns are encouraged to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479)*

444-5047.,” in regard to recommendations made to improve communication by the VA staff with the veteran. How frequently must the Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks refer individuals to community care through the Choice Program because the patient cannot be seen within 30 days?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO uses the options available through Office of Community Care in many instances: when the care cannot be provided within 30 days, it is too far from the Veterans home, or when we do not offer the service. Given the VA goal to focus resources more efficiently, we will continue to use these options available to Veterans to ensure timely care. We have implemented a number of methods to ensure this process goes smoothly, most recently by standing up a customer service section on our Fayetteville campus that houses VA Community Care Staff, VA Consolidated Patient Account Center staff, and Tri-West staff to address issues from appointing Veterans in the community to ensuring the bills are taken care of timely. We have already seen the benefit of this decision in terms of appointments being made more quickly and billing issues and errors being addressed more timely.

Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility

In the second Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, “*VHSO is committed to the highest level of customer service, and continues to incorporate the Customer Service Training in New Employee Orientation. We have also been conducting the VA 101 training, which incorporates more information on the ICARE values. It is the expectation of this facility that all employees demonstrate these in every interaction with all patients, and we pride ourselves on providing outstanding customer service.*” What actions are taken to ensure staff continually demonstrate ICARE values after the VA 101 training?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

VHSO has many mechanisms in place to ensure all staff are educated on the ICARE values, and that they demonstrate them in their daily work. Monthly, town halls are held where employees are recognized for their commitment to these values. ICARE certificates are now being awarded as part of a Thankful Thursday campaign to recognize staff for the things they are doing that meet the intent of the ICARE values. Ongoing education through service staff meetings is provided by service leadership. Leadership rounding has proven to be effective in recognizing employees who demonstrate ICARE values, and also for identifying any gaps in this area.

Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans

In the second Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program Summary Report, the VA Medical Center stated, “*The Veteran Voices Advisory Council is ongoing and meets regularly to discuss patient concerns. This group is made up of Veterans, their family members, and a VHSO staff liaison. This is a vital part of our governance structure, and the council is able to submit concerns, suggestions,*

and feedback directly to the Executive Leadership Board. The Patient Advocate positions are both filled and we review their data daily during our morning meeting to look for any trends or concerns that need to be addressed. While most of our Veterans report they are highly satisfied, it is important to us that every Veteran is highly satisfied. As stated in a prior response, we train every new employee on customer service, and are actively training staff in the VA 101 courses to affirm the commitment to the ICARE values. We strongly encourage Veterans with any concerns to contact the Patient Advocates by calling (479) 444-5047.” What changes have occurred within the Veterans Healthcare System of the Ozarks due to the creation of the Veteran Voices Advisory Council?

VA Medical Center’s Response:

One major change that came about as a result of feedback from Veterans on the Veteran Voice Advisory Council and volunteer feedback is the shuttle program. A decision was made a few years ago to suspend the shuttle service due to lack of use, and also due to use by employees which is against policy. However, through the council and our volunteers, feedback was given about the unintended negative consequences of this decision, and we have made the investment to institute a better shuttle system that helps Veterans get from parking lots to the building. Another example is patient programming – such as offering different classes through Patient Education, and having a monthly Veteran Coffee House that provides musical entertainment in the lobby. We look forward to continued work with the council to improve processes and make programming related decisions.



CONCLUSION

The Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program in the Southwest Missouri region is making progress with regard to customer service at the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks. This Summary Report provides continuing accountability and transparency of veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities and offers ideas for moving forward. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflects veterans' experiences and concerns with these facilities.

The VA's Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients Report provides the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. Alternatively, the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program survey provides the VA with some specific examples of the quality of the veterans' customer service experiences at the Southwest Missouri region VA facilities. It is evident from the veterans' responses that the Veterans Health Care System of the Ozarks is doing a superior job serving veterans across every category, particularly in the areas of scheduling, communication, and wait times. However, it is important that staff remain vigilant and responsive to veterans' concerns so that veterans continue to access the high quality care and customer service they rightly deserve.

I am pleased that 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. That the Interim Director is prioritizing the needs and care of veterans by investing in the strength and talents of VHSO personnel tells me he is committed to making steady progress on behalf of veterans. Additionally, I am encouraged by all of the many ways stakeholder feedback is being used to enhance veterans' experiences, along with the efforts to recognize VHSO staff who go the extra mile to deliver exceptional service to veterans.

In order to maintain the momentum we have achieved thus far, we need to continue working together in order to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue filling out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans' Customer Satisfaction Program is critical to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA Medical Center's responses on an annual basis.

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