

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 2, 2019

Director Darwin Goodspeed  
VA Portland Health Care System  
3710 SW U.S. Veterans Hospital Road  
Portland, OR 97239

Dear Director Goodspeed:

We write today regarding recent reports that the average wait time for veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Community-Based Outpatient Clinic in Salem is an average of 80 days for new primary care patients. This revelation is deeply troubling and we seek answers on what proactive measures the VA Portland Health Care System is taking to remedy this situation.

While we understand that recruiting and retaining doctors in Salem can be a challenge, that rationale is hardly an excuse for the current state of affairs. Salem is less than 50 miles from Portland, and people in other professions routinely commute to Salem from Portland. Making veterans commute for care is unacceptable, as travel for many veterans can be burdensome.

Our veterans answered the call to service and we should be doing everything we can to ensure we meet our obligations that were promised to these men and women when they signed up. To help us understand what the VA Portland Health Care System is doing to shorten the wait time and improve recruitment and retention, please provide answers to the following questions at your earliest convenience:

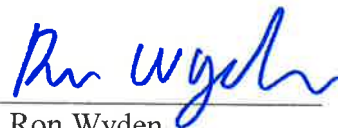
1. What strategies are in place to improve recruitment and retention for clinics that routinely have doctor shortages? Have these strategies worked? If not, what is being done to improve the strategies?
2. Does the VA Portland Health Care System require a doctor to reside in the community in which he or she is working? If not, what is preventing the VA Portland Health Care System from letting doctors from other cities commute to clinics that have doctor shortages? If there is such a requirement, is the VA Portland Health Care System considering allowing doctors to commute to clinics that have doctor shortages?
3. Please provide a detailed strategy for reducing wait times for veterans, particularly those transferring from other VA clinics, and what is needed to meet those goals.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter, we look forward to your responses to these questions. Our offices stand ready to work with your team to help address this situation so that our state's veterans can receive the timely care they have earned. If we or our offices can be helpful in any way, please don't hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator



Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



MAY 14 2019

In Reply Refer To: 648/P1DIR

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
United States Senate  
Washington DC 20510-3705

Dear Senators Wyden and Merkley,

Thank you for your recent inquiry regarding access to care at the Salem Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC). Ensuring timely, high-quality care for America's Veterans is our top priority.

VA Portland Health Care System (VAPORHCS) utilizes a multitude of strategies to recruit and retain providers to clinics where staffing has historically been a challenge. All Salem provider openings are recruited using the full range of incentives available to us as federal employers, including but not limited to financial relocation and recruitment incentives, Education Debt Repayment Program (EDRP), and Permanent Change of Station (PCS) funding. Total amount of financial incentives is contingent upon existing budget availability. Provider vacancies are advertised aggressively and widely using outside recruiters, national VA forums, and social media (VAPORHCS Facebook, LinkedIn). In addition, we also recruit from our existing contracted providers (Locums). We strive to minimize provider attrition by maximizing employee engagement by means of a positive work environment, unique care delivery structure (the Primary Aligned Care Team), and a diverse array of interdisciplinary clinical support teams. Lastly, we prioritize employee development by affording providers the opportunity to attend 40 hours of Continuous Medical Education (CME) per year.

Recent efforts using these strategies have proved successful as VAPORHCS has two providers currently onboarding (with arrival dates of June and August 2019). We will continue to utilize all available hiring flexibilities to employ the most effective recruitment strategies.

VAPORHCS does not require a provider to live in the community they serve. We have deployed providers from other VAPORHCS CBOCs to Salem when feasible, travelling from as far away as Vancouver, Washington. Additionally, our innovative virtual care technology enables providers to deliver care remotely thus bridging the geographic divide. One of our new providers delivers virtual care from Texas, travelling to Salem quarterly to interact with Veterans face-to-face.

Our plan to reduce wait times for Veterans, including those requesting a transfer from other clinics, is to fill our remaining provider vacancies, continue to deploy provider



coverage from other clinics and continue to offer care in the community as an option for Veterans seeking care.

Our staff are trained to provide Veterans all access options available when establishing care. These options include signing up for care at the Salem CBOC, enrolling at another VAPORHCS CBOC, or opting in for care in the community. Any Veteran wanting to establish care at the Salem CBOC who cannot get in within established wait times is offered care at another CBOC or are assigned to a primary care provider in the community. There are no Veterans waiting for care without options present to access care either in the community or at an alternate VA location.

As of this writing there 37 Veterans waiting to establish care at the Salem CBOC and 1,127 Veterans waiting to transfer to the Salem CBOC from other VAPORHCS CBOCs. We continuously call and offer to establish care for those 37 Veterans as appointments become available. Clinic staff also make routine contact with those waiting for care to ensure their care needs have not changed.

Each new provider we successfully recruit will be assigned a panel of 900-1200 Veterans. Once remaining vacancies are filled, VAPORHCS anticipates being able to assign all Veterans waiting to establish care at Salem, including all Veterans on the transfer list. In the meantime, we have two Locums providers scheduled to start this summer, which will help bridge the gap in coverage.

If you have further concerns please contact Daniel Herrigstad, the VAPORHCS Public Affairs Officer and Congressional Liaison, at 503-2208-8262 ext. 52975.

Sincerely,

DARWIN G. GOODSPEED, FACHE  
Director