

JAIME HERRERA BEUTLER
3RD DISTRICT, SOUTHWEST WASHINGTON

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND
URBAN DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND
RELATED AGENCIES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FINANCIAL SERVICES AND
GENERAL GOVERNMENT

COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-1602

□ 1130 LONGWORTH HOB
WASHINGTON D.C. 20515
(202) 225-3536

□ GENERAL O.O. HOWARD HOUSE
750 ANDERSON STREET, SUITE B
VANCOUVER, WA 98661
(360) 695-6292

WWW.JAIMEHB.HOUSE.GOV

June 22, 2014

The Honorable Sloan Gibson
Acting Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Gibson,

I am writing to express my strong concern over the lengthy wait times for veterans at the Portland VA Medical Center. The VA Audit Report found Portland, which serves Southwest Washington residents, has the fifth longest wait time in the nation for new primary care appointments, forcing veterans to wait an average of 80 days. New patients wait an average of 62 days for a specialty care appointment and 29 days for a mental health appointment. What is even more troubling is that I have heard from veterans who have been given even longer wait times than were found in the audit. In fact, one veteran waited nearly nine months for an MRI. I am outraged that this is how we are treating our veterans. This is unacceptable and must be addressed immediately.

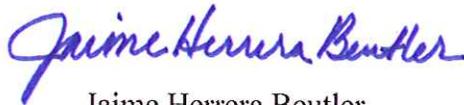
For this reason, I am pleased to have joined my colleagues in supporting the Veterans' Access to Care through Choice, Accountability, and Transparency Act. As you know, this bill would require the VA to authorize and pay for care outside the VA for veterans who have faced extensive wait times or live more than forty miles from a VA medical facility. This does not resolve the systemic problems within the VA. However, the goal of this bill is to provide immediate relief to veterans and to give them timely access to the high quality care they deserve. While this is an important option that some veterans will gladly utilize, this will not be a fix for everyone. A vast number of veterans will continue to rely on care from the VA system.

The Veteran's Health Administration's (VHA) call to "identify where Veterans are waiting for care and ensuring that timely, quality care is made available to our veterans as quickly as possible" is a step in the right direction. In your efforts to achieve this goal I urge you to consider the expanded use of Mobile Medical Units (MMU). As you may know, the MMUs were intended to increase access to healthcare by bring primary care to veterans in rural areas. Unfortunately, a recent VA OIG report found that some of the 47 VHA MMUs are used as little as five days per month, meaning these taxpayer-funded assets routinely sit idle. This is obviously not due to lack of demand.

I have requested the MMU unit in the Puget Sound Health Care System visit my district on several occasions, only to be told that it cannot make the trip due to the inability of the MMU to interface with the electronic health record systems at different VA medical facilities, despite the fact they are within the same Veterans Integrated Service Network. It is extremely upsetting that units built for mobility are restricted to small catchment areas due to technology issues. This is inconsistent with claims of having an integrated VA healthcare system.

Given that veterans in my district have the fifth longest wait times for primary care, and that we have an underutilized taxpayer resource in the MMU, I once again request that the MMU be deployed to Southwest Washington. If Mobile Medical Units cannot move between facilities catchment areas, I would like clarification with specific details explaining why they cannot be used, as well as if the VA plans to fix this policy. I also strongly suggest utilizing MMUs throughout the nation to increase access to healthcare for rural veterans.

Sincerely,



Jaime Herrera Beutler
Member of Congress