

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 2, 2015

The Honorable Robert McDonald
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald:

We write to invite you to visit Louisiana with the purpose of meeting with local veterans and directly responding to their concerns regarding the poor quality of treatment and services they receive from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Louisiana veterans have repeatedly been subject to unacceptable treatment by the VA. Specifically, staff of Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16 admitted last year to inappropriately denying claims for veterans' emergency medical care. According to VISN 16 staff, the majority of these denials are a result of staff forcing providers to repeatedly mail medical records, then falsely claiming those records were not received. In some cases, these inappropriate delays caused significant damage to veterans' credit ratings when providers were forced to bill veterans directly for compensation of services.

After VISN 16 admitted these failures, the Louisiana Congressional Delegation sent you a letter requesting detailed information about how the VA plans mitigate the backlog of veterans' emergency medical care claims and improve VA practices in Louisiana. Though the letter was mailed to you on September 18, 2014, it remains unanswered. Veterans deserve to have their concerns about this inappropriate behavior addressed.

Unfortunately, this was not the last we heard of VISN 16's inappropriate practices. When staff members from the VA's Chief Business Office were sent to Louisiana to meet and discuss the backlog of emergency medical care claims with stakeholders in November 2014, it was discovered that VISN 16 had refused to process large amounts of veterans' appeals, leaving thousands of related documents and letters either unfiled or unsent. These actions effectively deprive veterans of their due process rights and further contribute to the VA's poor reputation in Louisiana.

In addition to inappropriate treatment from VA staff, our veterans also face hardships due to limited availability of health care resources. Specifically in South Louisiana, veterans have been waiting years for an enlarged community-based outpatient clinic (CBOC) in Lafayette and a new CBOC in Lake Charles to meet their continued health care needs. Initial authorization for these clinics fell through in early 2012 after bureaucratic errors within the VA caused the projects to be scrapped. As you know, these clinics were reauthorized as part of P.L. 113-146, the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act of 2014, enacted last August. Though leases are scheduled to be awarded in late-February 2015, we have already learned that the original construction timelines provided to our offices by the VA will be delayed by almost a year for each CBOC.

We have been informed the reason for the delays is that the construction bids submitted all followed similar, extended timelines because experts advised the original timelines provided by the VA were unrealistic for these projects. The VA's Office of Congressional and Legislative Affairs explained that the updated timelines were discussed shortly after the CBOCs were reauthorized in August 2014, and the solicitations for offers (SFO) for each facility were amended to include the extended timelines in September 2014. We want to be clear that we trust construction experts' opinions on this matter. However, we are disturbed the VA amended the SFOs for these facilities without formally notifying stakeholders in a timely manner. In the future, we request the VA notify our Congressional offices directly, and immediately, of all issues related to the Lafayette and Lake Charles CBOCs.

This letter touches on just a few of the problems that have caused trust issues between Louisiana veterans and the VA. We are aware the Veterans Action Coalition of Southwest Louisiana has asked you to travel to Louisiana and meet with local veterans to discuss their serious issues with the VA. Amid mounting concerns of inappropriate practices within your agency, and specifically within VISN 16, we urge you to visit veterans in our state so they may have the opportunity to directly express their concerns to you and hear your plans to improve VA operations in Louisiana.

Thank you for considering this request. We look forward to your timely response.

Sincerely,



David Vitter
United States Senator



Charles W. Boustany, Jr., M.D.
Member of Congress