



Waiting Times for Veterans Health Care in Oklahoma

Prepared for Rep. Brad Carson

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Concerns over waiting times at clinics run by the Department of Veterans Affairs have been increasing for almost a decade. In response to these concerns, Congress passed legislation in 1996 requiring the VA to provide “timely” care to veterans, and the VA established a national goal of scheduling all nonurgent primary and specialty care appointments within 30 days. The VA pledged to meet this goal by 1998.

At the request of Rep. Brad Carson, who represents the 2nd Congressional District in Oklahoma, this report investigates waiting times at VA primary and specialty care clinics in Oklahoma. This is the first report to analyze whether VA facilities in Oklahoma are complying with the requirement to schedule appointments for veterans within 30 days. The report reveals that long waiting times are a serious problem for Oklahoma veterans.

The report finds:

- **VA clinics in Oklahoma fail to schedule thousands of appointments within 30 days.** An analysis of the waiting times experienced by veterans requesting “next available” appointments shows that in September 2002, 41% of eye care appointments were not made within 30 days, 27% of cardiology appointments were not made within 30 days, and 20% of urology appointments were not made within 30 days. In total, an estimated 7,100 “next available” appointments for veterans in Oklahoma will not be scheduled within the required 30 days in 2002. Table 1.
- **In many cases, Oklahoma veterans must wait months for the “next available” appointments.** Data obtained from the VA indicate that Oklahoma veterans must often wait months to obtain appointments, even when they schedule the “next available” appointment. In September 2002, for example, average waiting times for “next available” appointments in Oklahoma veterans hospitals were 56 days for eye care appointments. In September 2002, over 500 veterans were required to wait more than six months for appointments at VA facilities in Oklahoma. Almost all of these veterans were waiting for appointments at the Oklahoma City veterans center.
- **New VA patients in Oklahoma face especially long waits.** VA clinics in Oklahoma often place eligible veterans seeking VA care for the first time on “waiting lists.” Veterans can remain on these waiting lists for months, during which period they cannot schedule medical appointments at all. As of September, 2002, there were 878 Oklahoma veterans on the waiting lists. The majority of these veterans – 527 – were on the waiting list for a primary care appointment at the Lawton outpatient clinic. Once taken off of these waiting lists, Oklahoma veterans must still often wait months for appointments.

One of the primary causes of the long waiting times for veterans health care is inadequate funding for VA care. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of veterans seeking health care from the VA has increased by 45%, while the VA budget increased only 32%. As a result of these funding pressures, the VA issued a directive to the VA’s regional health care directors on

TABLE 1: Oklahoma VA Clinics Are Unable To Schedule Many Appointments Within 30 Days

Clinic Type	% of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days	Estimated Annual Number of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days
Eye Care	41%	1,308
Cardiology	27%	696
Urology	20%	468
Audiology	17%	660
Primary Care	10%	3,924
Orthopedics	7%	84

July 18, 2002, acknowledging that the VA “is currently facing a growing crisis related to the continued demand for healthcare services that exceeds our resources.” The VA directive instructed the regional health care directors “to ensure that no marketing activities to enroll new veterans occur.”

Congress responded to this funding shortage by passing emergency spending legislation in August 2002 to increase funding for VA clinics by \$410 million. President Bush, however, announced that he will not release \$275 million in these emergency funds, including over \$23 million for the veterans health care network that includes Oklahoma. This \$23 million would provide funding for the care of almost 6,000 veterans.

I. BACKGROUND

The Department of Veterans Affairs runs the nation's largest health care system, providing care to over four million veterans through a nationwide network of hospitals, nursing homes, and outpatient clinics. All veterans are eligible to obtain care from VA facilities, but priority is given to veterans who have service-connected illnesses or disabilities or who have low incomes.¹

The VA serves as a critical health care resource for tens of thousands of veterans in Oklahoma. In 2002, the VA provided care for 71,022 veterans in the state at major medical centers in Muskogee and Oklahoma City, and at community-based outpatient clinics located in Ardmore, Clinton, Konawa, Lawton, McAlester, Ponca City, Tulsa, and West Falls.

During the 1990s, long waiting times emerged as a significant concern at VA facilities. As early as 1993, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that "veterans are too often experiencing lengthy service delays when they seek ambulatory care at VA facilities."² In response to these findings and the increasing concern of veterans, Congress required in 1996 that the VA provide "timely" care to veterans,³ and the VA established a national goal of scheduling all nonurgent primary and specialty care appointments within 30 days of request. The VA pledged to meet this goal by 1998.⁴

In August 2001, the General Accounting Office found that the VA has yet to achieve this goal, finding that although some progress had been made, both primary and specialty care clinics were not meeting the VA goal of providing appointments within 30 days of request.⁵ Recent

¹The Veterans Health Care Reform Act of 1996 required that the VA establish seven categories for enrollment, with the highest priority being given to veterans who have service-related disabilities or low incomes. The lowest priority is given to veterans who do not have service-connected disabilities and have higher incomes. The veterans with the lowest priority are known as "Priority 7" veterans. Under the law, the VA is allowed to restrict enrollment if sufficient resources are not available to provide care, starting with the Priority 7 veterans. In 2002, the VA did not formally restrict access to the system for any veterans.

²GAO, *VA Health Care: Restructuring Ambulatory Care System Would Improve Services to Veterans* (October 1993) (GAO/HRD-94-4).

³Veterans Health Care Eligibility Reform Act of 1996, P.L. 104-362, Sec. 104(b)(1).

⁴See GAO, *VA Health Care: More National Action Needed to Reduce Waiting Times, but Some Clinics Have Made Progress* (August 2001) (GAO-01-953).

⁵*Id.*

increases in the enrollment of veterans for VA care appear to be making matters even worse. As a result, waiting times for veterans are again increasing, and the VA is, according to one analysis, being “overwhelmed with new patients.”⁶

II. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

At the request of Rep. Brad Carson, who represents Oklahoma’s 2nd Congressional District, this report analyzes waiting times for medical appointments at VA facilities in Oklahoma and compares these waiting times to the VA’s goal of scheduling all appointments within 30 days. The report is based upon waiting time data provided upon request by the Department of Veterans Affairs to the Special Investigations Division of the minority staff of the Committee on Government Reform. This is the first comprehensive analysis of waiting times for medical care experienced by Oklahoma’s veterans.

III. FINDINGS

A. Thousands of Veterans in Oklahoma Must Wait over 30 Days for a “Next Available” Appointment

Patients in the VA system can request a “next available” appointment for needed, nonemergency care. The Department of Veterans Affairs has established a national goal of scheduling these “next available” appointments within 30 days of the request. According to the data from the VA, however, the Department is failing to meet this goal in Oklahoma facilities.

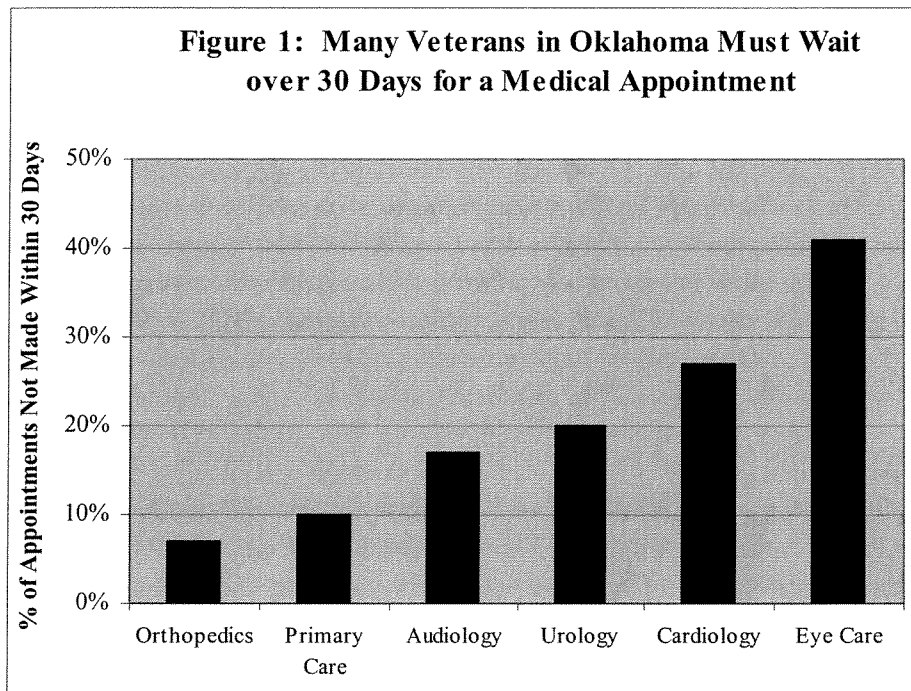
In September 2002, there were 3,386 primary care appointments requested for the “next available” time slot at VA facilities in Oklahoma. During this month, one in every ten of these appointments were not scheduled within the 30 day period. At this rate over a full year, an estimated 3,923 “next available” primary care appointments would not be scheduled within 30 days.

At specialty clinics – audiology, cardiology, eye care, orthopedics, and urology – veterans in Oklahoma are even less likely to obtain the “next available” appointment within 30 days. The highest rate of late appointments was at eye care clinics, where 41% of appointments in September 2002 were not scheduled within 30 days. Over one in four “next available” appointments at cardiology clinics (27%) were also not scheduled within 30 days. See Figure 1. In total there were 268 specialty care appointments that were not scheduled within 30 days in September 2002. At this rate over a full year an estimated 3,216 specialty care appointments would not be scheduled within 30 days.

The data on waiting times for primary and specialty care can be combined to give an overall estimate of the number of appointments for veterans that will not be scheduled within 30

⁶*Prognosis Grim: Aging Veterans Are Overwhelming VA*, Federal Times (Aug 19, 2002).

days in 2002. This calculation shows that an estimated 7,139 appointments in Oklahoma veterans facilities will not be scheduled within 30 days in 2002.



B. Average Waiting Times for “Next Available” Appointments in Oklahoma

Average waiting time data from the VA indicate that veterans in Oklahoma seeking the “next available” primary care or specialist appointment must wait weeks or months to see a doctor. The longest average waiting times for “next available” appointments are for eye care appointments. In September 2002 veterans in Oklahoma had an average wait of 56 days – almost two months – for the “next available” eye care appointment. Average waiting times in September 2002 for “next available” cardiology and urology appointments were almost one month (24 and 23 days respectively).

In some cases, the wait for appointments can last for many months. According to data from the VA, as of September 2002 there were 528 veterans who were forced to wait more than six months for a scheduled primary or specialty care visit at an Oklahoma VA facility.⁷ Almost all of these veterans – 516 – were waiting for an appointment at the Oklahoma City VA center.

⁷According to the VA, “the recorded numbers were derived primarily from data gathered manually from multiple primary care and specialty clinics at all VA facilities. The reported totals could therefore count veterans more than once if they sought enrollment at more than one site, or are patients currently being seen at one location and have sought enrollment at a site closer to their home, or are patients waiting for more than one specialty appointment.”

C. New VA Patients in Oklahoma Face Long Waiting Lists and Long Waits for Care

Veterans in Oklahoma seeking care from the VA health care system for the first time can face especially long waits before they can obtain an appointment with a physician. These delays occur for two reasons.

First, VA clinics in Oklahoma often place eligible veterans seeking first-time care on waiting lists, sometimes for months. According to the data obtained from the VA, there were 878 veterans in Oklahoma on waiting lists in September 2002.⁸ Veterans were placed on waiting lists at three Oklahoma facilities – Lawton, Ponca City, and West Falls. The facility with the most veterans on the waiting list was in Lawton, with 527 veterans. While on these waiting lists, the veterans cannot schedule any appointments

Second, even if veterans are finally removed from the waiting list and allowed to schedule appointments, they must often wait weeks or months for appointments. In September 2002, veterans who were new patients waited an average of 68 days – over two months – for an eye care appointment. Average waiting times for orthopedic and primary care appointments for new patients were well over one month (47 and 39 days, respectively), while average waiting times for new cardiology, audiology, and urology appointments approached one month (28 days, 27 days, and 26 days, respectively). See Table 2.

TABLE 2: New VA Patients in Oklahoma Face Long Waits for Appointments

Appointment Type	Average Waiting Time for New VA Patient
Eye Care	68 days
Orthopedic	47 days
Primary Care	39 days
Cardiology	28 days
Audiology	27 days
Urology	26 days

D. Waiting Time Trends

Data from the VA fail to show significant progress in reducing waiting times for Oklahoma veterans over the last year. For new patients, average waiting times have increased for audiology, cardiology, primary care, eye care, and orthopedics appointments since September

⁸Department of Veterans Affairs, *Oklahoma Facilities September 2002 Waiting List and Waiting Time Data* (Oct. 24, 2002).

2001. Average waiting times for orthopedics appointments have more than doubled, increasing from 23 days in September 2001 to 47 days in September 2002. Similarly, average waiting times for primary care appointments have almost doubled, increasing from 22 days in September 2001 to 39 days in September 2002.

For existing VA patients, average waiting times for “next available appointments have increased in some areas while decreasing in others. In the last year, average waiting times for “next available” audiology, cardiology, and eye care appointments have increased, while average waiting times for primary care, orthopedics, and urology appointments have decreased. Similarly, in the last year, the percentage of “next available” audiology, cardiology, and eye care appointments scheduled within 30 days has decreased, while the percentage of primary care, orthopedics, and urology appointments scheduled within 30 days has increased.

IV. THE REASONS FOR LONG WAITING TIMES FOR VA CARE FOR OKLAHOMA VETERANS

The primary reason for the long waiting times faced by the nation’s veterans is a lack of resources. In recent years, the number of veterans seeking care at VA facilities has increased significantly, and funding increases for the VA have not kept pace. Between 1996 and 2001, the number of veterans receiving VA healthcare increased by 45%, from 2.9 million to 4.2 million.⁹ The VA healthcare budget failed to keep pace with the enrollment increase over this five-year period, growing by only 30%.¹⁰ In Oklahoma, although the VA budget has kept pace with the increasing number of veterans seeking VA care, waiting times are still excessively long.¹¹ This indicates that there continues to be a funding shortfall.

The VA issued a directive to the VA’s regional health care directors on July 18, 2002, acknowledging that the VA “is currently facing a growing crisis related to the continued demand for healthcare services that exceeds our resources.” Because of the crisis, the VA directive instructed the regional health care directors “to ensure that no marketing activities to enroll new veterans occur.”¹²

⁹Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Health Care: Systemwide Workload, FY 1996-2001* (2002) (online at <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/ProgramStatics/index.htm>).

¹⁰Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Health Care: Systemwide Obligations, FY 1996-2001* (2002) (online at <http://www.va.gov/vetdata/ProgramStatics/index.htm>).

¹¹Department of Veterans Affairs, *Oklahoma Funding and Unique Patient Workload* (October 2002).

¹²Department of Veterans Affairs, Memorandum from Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Operations and Management to Network Directors, *Status of VHA Enrollment and Associated Issues* (July 18, 2002).

Congress responded to this funding shortage by passing emergency spending legislation in August 2002 to increase funding for VA clinics by \$410 million.¹³ However, \$275 million of this funding was subject to approval by President Bush. On August 13, the President announced that he would not release any of this money.¹⁴ This \$275 million in funding would have included an estimated \$23.5 million for the veterans health care network that includes Oklahoma.¹⁵ This \$23.5 million would pay for the care of approximately \$6,000 veterans in the region.¹⁶

V. CONCLUSION

Under VA policy, veterans should be able to schedule medical appointments at VA facilities within 30 days. This policy, however, is not being achieved in Oklahoma. Thousands of veterans appointments in Oklahoma will not be scheduled within this 30 day period in 2002, and veterans must frequently wait weeks or months for appointments. Hundreds of veterans must wait over six months for appointments, and over 800 veterans in the state are on waiting lists for medical care and are unable to schedule appointments.

¹³Public Law 107-206.

¹⁴*Politics: Bush Rejects \$5.1 Billion in Security Spending*, Associated Press (Aug. 13, 2002).

¹⁵Approximately \$140 million of the \$410 million that was appropriated by Congress was received by the VA. The VA health care network that includes Oklahoma received 8.5% of these funds, or \$12.1 million. The estimate of an additional \$23.5 million that would be received by VISN-15 assumes that VISN-15 would also receive 8.5% of the total of \$275 million in funding that was not released by President Bush.

¹⁶Data from the VA indicates that the average cost of care per patient in Oklahoma was \$3,984 annually. *Oklahoma Funding and Unique Patient Workload*, *supra* note 11. Thus, assuming they had the same average costs as current patients, the \$23.5 million could be used to pay for the care of approximately 5,897 new patients.

Appendix: September 2002 Waiting Times At Individual VA Facilities in Oklahoma

Table A1: September 2002 Waiting Time Data for the VA Muskogee Medical Center

Clinic Type	Number of “Next Available” Scheduled Appointments	% of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days	Average “Next Available” Wait Times (Days)	Average New Patient Wait Times (Days)
Audiology	86	5%	9	30
Cardiology	9	0%	8	20
Eye Care	45	42%	39	62
Orthopedics	32	3%	14	42
Primary Care	95	14%	20	30
Urology	60	52%	38	35

Table A2: September 2002 Waiting Time Data for the VA Oklahoma City Medical Center

Clinic Type	Number of “Next Available” Scheduled Appointments	% of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days	Average “Next Available” Wait Times (Days)	Average New Patient Wait Times (Days)
Audiology	232	22%	17	26
Cardiology	209	28%	25	32
Eye Care	164	52%	76	89
Orthopedics	63	10%	11	49
Primary Care	2,032	3%	9	11
Urology	33	9%	19	26

Table A3: September 2002 Waiting Time Data for the VA Tulsa Medical Center

Clinic Type	Number of “Next Available” Scheduled Appointments	% of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days	Average “Next Available” Wait Times (Days)	Average New Patient Wait Times (Days)
Primary Care	785	30%	34	91
Eye Care	55	7%	10	50
Urology	101	5%	16	16

Table A4: September 2002 Waiting Time Data for VA Primary Care Centers in Oklahoma

Clinic Location	Number of “Next Available” Scheduled Appointments	% of Appointments Not Scheduled Within 30 Days	Average “Next Available” Wait Times (Days)	Average New Patient Wait Times (Days)
McAlester	29	0%	5	19
Lawton	163	14%	11	35
W. Falls	279	0%	4	51