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AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION,  
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VETERANS' AFFAIRS  
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR,  
AND PENSIONS  
JOINT ECONOMIC COMMITTEE

October 14, 2020

Richard A. Stone, M.D.  
Executive in Charge  
Veterans Health Administration  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Dr. Stone,

Thank you for your commitment to caring for the men and women who have served and sacrificed for our country, over 700,000 of whom call Georgia home. Under the current administration, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has taken significant steps to improve the way in which veterans receive the care they need and benefits they deserve. However, I write today to express concern over recent reports that many veterans in Georgia are facing significant wait times for care under the new Veterans Community Care Program (VCCP).

In 2018, Congress worked with the administration to significantly reform the way in which the VA provides care to our nation's veterans through the passage of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act. One of the primary goals of the VA MISSION Act was to ensure that every veteran has access to quality care in the communities where they live. To accomplish this goal, the bill authorized the creation of the VCCP to consolidate existing community care programs under the VA into a single program, in order to improve efficiency and ensure that veterans receive care when they need it.

The VA officially launched the VCCP in June 2019 and began the process of rolling out a new community care network (CCN) across six regions. Under the VA MISSION Act, third-party administrators are responsible for building and maintaining the network of non-VA providers in each region. VA medical centers (VAMCs) are responsible for determining patient eligibility for community care and for the coordination and scheduling of such care. In June 2020, the new CCN in Georgia was deployed through the third-party administrator Optum.

Although the VCCP was created to improve patient choice and ensure timely access to care, a recent report from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution suggests that as of late September 2020, 4,632 veterans in Georgia waited at least 180 days for a community care appointment to be scheduled through the Atlanta VAMC. The report also suggests that "an additional 5,458 requests" for community care had not been scheduled within 30 days.<sup>1</sup> Several weeks ago, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that although the VA has established a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ajc.com/news/georgia-veterans-wait-times-for-medical-help-skyrocket/IDN4Z5JYRRDMBNVFXVY5PESJNY/>

“maximum potential allowable wait time”<sup>2</sup> of approximately 19 days for routine referrals to be submitted for scheduling, the VA has not established a time frame by which an appointment should occur.<sup>3</sup>

I understand that COVID-19 has created delays across our healthcare system, including at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), and that the formal rollout of the CCN is still occurring across the country. However, I believe you would agree with me that no veteran should have to wait six months to receive care. Therefore, I respectfully ask that you provide answers to the following questions:

- 1) What steps is the VHA taking to reduce wait times for community care under the VCCP?
- 2) What steps has the VHA taken to adequately prepare staff for the scheduling and coordinating of community care required under the VA MISSION Act?
- 3) Has the VHA considered implementing an internal time frame by which a referral for community care under the VCCP should be scheduled?

Thank you again for your commitment to our nation’s veterans. I look forward to continuing to work together on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Kelly Loeffler  
United States Senator

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<sup>2</sup> According to GAO, the “maximum potential allowable wait time” of approximately 19 days refers to the time it should take for a VA provider to submit a routine (not urgent) referral for community care to the VAMC’s Referral Coordination Team (RCT) and for the RCT to then submit the referral to the VAMC’s community care staff for scheduling.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/assets/710/709804.pdf>