

# United States Senate

July 14, 2015

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

Dear Secretary McDonald,

Next month will mark one year since Congress passed historic legislation to empower veterans that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has been unable to provide benefits in a timely manner. I am extremely concerned that despite the creation of the VA Choice Card program, wait times for veterans seeking care from the VA have actually worsened since the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 was enacted.

As you know, Congress appropriated an additional \$16 billion in order to eliminate the wait times for veterans seeking care. More than a third of this money was provided for the VA to hire doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals as well as enter into long-term leases for new facilities the VA stated it needed to reduce wait times. Another \$10 billion was appropriated for an unprecedented new program to allow certain veterans, but especially those who could not be seen at the VA within 30 days, the right to obtain the health care they have earned from the doctor of their choice.

However, according to a report from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, fewer than one in five veterans eligible for the program surveyed were even offered a Choice Card. Despite over 8.5 million Veterans Choice Cards being issued, only 27,000 veterans have managed to get VA approval to make appointments for private medical care using the cards. Nearly 500,000 veterans have attempted to use the VA Choice Card by calling the toll-free number but must navigate a labyrinth of prompts before speaking to an actual person, which in some cases has taken hours. Also, you may be familiar with the case of a young Army veteran was turned away from a VA clinic while seeking care for post-traumatic stress disorder. Based on the statistics compiled by the Veterans of Foreign Wars and from my own constituents sharing their inability to use the VA Choice Card, it is clear that more than a year after the national scandal on VA wait times that little has changed within the culture of the VA.

Please provide me the following information on your plan to improve the utilization of the VA Choice Card and to decrease wait times for veterans:

1. Monthly data (from February 2015 to June 2015) on the number of calls for the VA Choice Card, the number of eligible veterans, and the number of successful medical appointments made and completed.
2. Detailed descriptions of the VA's efforts to train its employees and provide outreach to veterans on the use of the VA Choice Card.

3. How the VA has used the emergency supplemental funding and expedited hiring authority to hire more providers.
4. An update on the number, if any, of senior VA officials terminated under the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act's provisions on accountability.

Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John McCain", with a period at the end. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

John McCain  
United States Senator