



# Claire McCaskill

United States Senator

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Review:

## St. Louis Region Veterans Affairs Medical Centers Customer Satisfaction Report

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June 2011  
Report No: 2011 – 01



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<http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov>



### **St. Louis Region Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program**

Since arriving in the United States Senate, Senator Claire McCaskill has made keeping our promises to veterans one of her highest priorities. As a daughter of a World War II veteran, Claire knows the vital sacrifices that veterans have made for the security of our country in order to safeguard America's core values and freedoms. In return for their contributions, she believes that our country owes veterans important benefits, including access to safe, respectful, reliable medical care through our Veterans Affairs (VA) system of hospitals and clinics, both in Missouri and across the country.

Following a series of highly-publicized problems with the quality of care at the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center - John Cochran division last summer, Claire reached out to Missouri veterans and VA administrators to address the erosion of confidence in the overall quality of care and customer service at John Cochran VA Medical Center. Although many veterans report positive experiences with the medical care at John Cochran VA Medical Center, significant frustration exists among veterans with the customer service that they receive at John Cochran VA Medical Center, and to a lesser extent, other VA medical facilities in Missouri. In response, Claire announced plans for a "secret shopper" program for veterans – formally named the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program – to rate the quality of service at Missouri VA facilities and to provide the VA targeted, quick-turnaround feedback about veterans' positive and negative experiences with the VA medical centers.

Following the announcement of the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program, Claire and her staff collaborated with leaders from various Missouri veterans organizations and VA administrators to shape the program. Through this cooperation, a constructive, confidential survey was developed that would both be useful to the VA Medical Center and act as an independent resource for veterans that they could use to make recommendations to the VA Medical Center. The Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program acts as an independent, transparent voice for veterans. It has three major goals:

- (1) Improve communications between veterans and VA medical centers;
- (2) Improve overall customer service ratings of VA medical centers in Missouri;
- (3) Improve the willingness of veterans to positively recommend Missouri VA medical facilities to other veterans.

This report represents the first Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program summary report for the St. Louis region facilities and includes the first-ever compilation of the survey data as reported directly by Missouri veterans.



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# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 27, 2011

To the Director of the St. Louis Region Veterans Affairs Medical Center,  
Members of the St. Louis Veterans Affairs Medical Center  
and  
Missouri's Veterans:

I am pleased to release the results of my Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program for the first time. When I proposed this "secret shopper" program, I told you that I wouldn't be happy until Missouri's veterans are happy. After reviewing the responses from 185 veterans and coordinating with our partners at the St. Louis Region Veterans Affairs and the veterans service organizations, I believe we are taking the first critical steps on the path to restoring and reviving veterans' confidence in the St. Louis Region Veterans Affairs and focusing the voices of veterans so the Veterans Affairs (VA) can better respond to their needs.

I commend the VA administrators, employees, and staff for their selfless service and competent professionalism, and I know they want to improve wherever they can to ensure veterans have a positive experience while at Missouri VA medical centers. A majority of veterans rated their overall healthcare experience as "fair" or above in our first survey summary, but there is still work to be done. The leadership at the St. Louis Region VA recognizes their tremendous obligation in serving Missouri's veterans, and they committed to responding to the concerns expressed to me in these surveys within 30 days.

I appreciate the help and support from my partners at the St. Louis Region VA and several Missouri veterans organizations. But most importantly, I appreciate our veterans for their service, sacrifice, and support for the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program. Together we *can* and *will* improve the quality of customer care in Missouri VA medical facilities, starting right here in St. Louis.

Respectfully,



Claire McCaskill

Please visit [www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp](http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp) for more information.

United States Senator

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The following members of my staff participated in the preparation of this report:

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**Would you like your voice heard?**

Veterans can complete a survey of their current experience at a VA facility at:  
<http://mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp/>.

Please visit [www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp](http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp) for more information.



## REPORT

We have reviewed the responses received from the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the St. Louis region. The small number of survey results that we received from veterans visiting VA medical centers in other regions in the state were reviewed by senate office caseworkers and responded to on a case-by-case basis if casework was necessary. When these survey results from other regions included recommendations for improvements with the overall Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system, we incorporated those comments in the current report. The scope of our review included, but was not necessarily limited to, comments received about St. Louis VA medical centers from February 22 through April 30, 2011. Comments after that period will be reviewed in the next summary report.

The objectives of our review were to:

- Identify specific concerns from veterans regarding the customer service received while interacting with the St. Louis Region VA Medical Center;
- Identify areas where communication can be improved between veterans and the St. Louis Region VA Medical Center;
- Identify criticisms impacting the overall customer service ratings of the St. Louis Region VA Medical Center;
- Identify concerns that impact the willingness of veterans to positively recommend the St. Louis Region VA Medical Center to other veterans;
- Report the full range of responses received from the veterans to the St. Louis Region VA;
- Issue a public report of the survey conclusions and resolutions of any identified issues.

Our methodology included reviewing responses submitted on the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program surveys, identifying any specific urgent issues and working directly with the veteran to get an immediate response from the VA, and submitting other concerns identified on the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program to the VA. Some of the veterans elected not to take immediate action regarding issues identified in the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program survey.

Prior to the issuance of the report, representatives of various veterans service organizations reviewed the summary report and made recommendations for suggested improvements at the VA facilities. Their comments and recommendations have been incorporated in this report.

The VA has provided responses to all recommendations.



### SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The Department of Veterans Affairs oversees the largest healthcare system in the nation through a network of 23 Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Missouri is mostly comprised in Veterans Integrated Service Network 15 with a large portion of Southwestern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 16 and small portions of Northern Missouri in Veterans Integrated Service Network 23. In order for the VA to gauge the satisfaction of veterans receiving care at individual VA Medical Centers, the VA established the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients in 2002. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients was designed to consolidate multiple VA healthcare survey programs into a single program that collects data on both inpatient and outpatient experiences of veterans at a VA Medical Center. The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients focuses on the quality of care.

With the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients serving as a blueprint, Senator McCaskill's office, veteran leaders, and the St. Louis VA Medical Center worked together to develop an independent survey to serve as a resource veterans can use to make recommendations to each individual VA Medical Center regarding the quality of *customer service*.

#### Scope

The scope of this review included, but was not necessarily limited to, those VA facilities located in the St. Louis region and statewide locations that received a Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program survey during the period February 22 through April 30, 2011. In the St. Louis region, 185 veterans completed surveys during that period.

Information used to complete this report included:

- Completed surveys received from veterans who received care at a VA facility.
- Communications with, and information received from, representatives from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Missouri Association of Veterans Organizations and VA officials.

#### Methodology

During our review, a database established by and internal to the senate office was used to accumulate results and compile data in tabulated form. In instances where veterans reported the need for immediate or urgent assistance in response to their case, additional information was gathered so the VA could respond immediately to their needs.

Survey questionnaires were available through veterans service organizations, from VA patient representatives and online at [www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp](http://www.mccaskill.senate.gov/vcsp). Veterans self reported their customer service experience at the VA facility either directly online or by submitting a written survey to a veterans service organization or to Senator McCaskill's office that was then entered into the database.

All completed surveys were reviewed independently by representatives of the veterans service organizations who selected specific comments to be included in the report based on the significance and relevance of the comment to the question. Those comments not selected for reporting were taken in consideration when writing the report but were not directly quoted due to the comments either not having as significant a level of relevance to the question asked or missing key information to draw a conclusion.

### **Limitations**

Data presented are compiled from survey information submitted by veterans. The comments included were extracted directly from the surveys. These comments were not verified by the senate office through additional procedures for accuracy, validity, or completeness.

This is not meant to be a scientifically-constructed study.



## OBSERVATIONS & RESULTS

### Background

This summary report covered the periods from February 22, 2011 to April 30, 2011. During this period, 185 veterans completed the Veterans’ Customer Satisfaction Program survey for the St. Louis Region. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the veterans indicated that they had received services at the John Cochran division.

In the survey, veterans reported the era that they served. All eras of veterans from World War II to present day were represented with Vietnam era veterans comprising 53.6% of the respondents. Below is a chart which details the composition of veterans participating in the survey:

WWII	5.6%
Korea	5.6%
Vietnam	53.6%
Desert Shield/ Desert Storm	12.8%
Iraq/Afghanistan	9.5%
Other	22.3%

These veterans utilized multiple services while at the Medical Center. Out of the 185 surveyed, veterans reported using the following VA clinic categories:

Primary Care	45.0%	Emergency Room	17.5%	Extended Care	3.5%
Outpatient Clinic	17.5%	Mental Health Services	17.5%	Dental	9.4%
Pharmacy	24.6%	X-Ray	24.0%	Laboratory	25.7%
Travel/Enrollment	7.6%	Main Lobby	15.8%	Specialist Visit	28.1%
Inpatient Care	8.8%	Women’s clinic	4.1%	Spinal Cord Injury Unit	4.1%
Other	32.7%	(Senior Veterans Clinic, Neurology, Dermatology, Cardiology)			

## **Review of survey question results**

The current review disclosed various issues regarding customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the results of each of the survey questions.

### **1. Ease of scheduling appointments**

Concerns were noted related to the ability to easily schedule an appointment at a VA facility.

#### **Were you able to schedule your appointment easily?**

Yes:	74.4%
No:	25.6%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 164 veterans responded to this question with 122 veterans stating they did not have a problem with scheduling their appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Although the majority of the veterans were pleased with the ease of scheduling their appointments, the veterans who indicated having trouble with making appointments stated most of their issues were with scheduling appointments over the phone and being unable to reach a VA official who could schedule an appointment. Some veterans noted that when they reached an official, there were problems with poor communication and unprofessionalism.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “It’s hard to do it over the phone. Sometimes the main phone is not answered for a long time. Sometimes transferred calls take a long time to be answered.”
- “No one ever answers calls. I have to leave message and most time never get called back.”
- “Clerks were not busy, but acted like they were doing us a favor. Acted very rude.”

Within these responses, veterans did indicate that scheduling appointments has become easier in recent months.

- “A year ago my answer would have been no, but they have greatly improved.”

**Recommendation:** Improve the phone and appointment system to be more responsive and courteous. Improve call-back / response times with targeted tracking systems to track returned calls.

#### **VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*In 2009, the centralized scheduling call center was established. The call center is open from 7:30 am to 7:00 pm Monday thru Friday and from 10 am to 6:30 pm on Saturdays. This call*

center has a telephone system that allows calls to be processed by the next available staff member and software that measures the various times in the process. Some of the measures that are tracked include the following: (1) the number of calls received, (2) the volume of call by hour, (3) the time to answer, (4) length of call, (5) hold time, (6) call abandon rate and (7) dropped call rates.

The goal of the call center is to make the appointment with the Veteran and his or her preferences, such as time of day or day of the week. In order to effect this goal, staff in the call center receives specialized training on telephone skills, customer service and schedule procedures. Administrative staff, who work in primary care or specialty care clinic, has also received this training. Staff is given regular feedback on their Veteran interactions and communications, including responsiveness and courtesy.

The average speed of calls answered during April 2011 is 25 seconds. Over the last 1 ½ years, the number of clinics that are processed through the call center has increased from 50 to over 400 clinics. Additionally, the medical center is working to increase the number of clinics served by the call center.

Secure messaging between Veterans and their provider has started at St Louis VA Medical Center. This messaging is available through My HealtheVet personal health record. Veterans interested in this option for communicating with their provider should contact the My HealtheVet Coordinator Jimmy Lomax. Mr. Lomax can be reached at the following telephone number: 314-652-4100, Ext. 5-4047 or Ext. 6-3301.

## **2. Ease of access appointment location at the facility**

Most veterans reported that they were able to navigate the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region in order to find the location of their appointments. However, better signage at the VA facilities and more information on the location of the clinic within the hospital in the appointment letter would be helpful.

### **Were you able to find your way to your appointment easily?**

Yes:	90.5%
No:	9.5%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 158 veterans responded to this question with 143 veterans stating they did not have a problem finding their way to appointments at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. We view this as a strong sign that the VA has taken the necessary steps to help veterans navigate the VA facilities while construction is underway at the VA facilities. We assume the positioning of greeters near elevators has also assisted in directing veterans and their families to the proper appointment location as well.

Although the vast majority of veterans were able to get to their appointments easily, the veterans who had difficulty finding their appointments indicated that better signage at the VA facility and

more information on the location of the appointment on the appointment letter would be helpful to orient them better at the front end of their experience within the VA facility.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “Signage for clinics can be improved.”
- “Information on appointment letter failed to provide a location, other than floor number.”

**Recommendation:** Improve the signage for clinics located at the facilities and give specific location of the clinic in the appointment letter.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*During the first quarter of Fiscal Year 2011, the St. Louis VA Medical Center implemented a new comprehensive signage and way finding program. The installation of the new signage at John Cochran campus has been completed. Beginning May 2011, the signage at Jefferson Barrack’s campus is being installed. Veterans and staff have given us very positive feedback on the internal and external signage.*

*Appointment letters sent to Veterans in anticipation of upcoming medical visits are reviewed annually to ensure the content is up-to-date. This review includes the verification of the correct clinic name and instructions for the appointment. Recently, our business managers and administrative officers for the various clinical services at the medical center have undertaken review of their patient appointment letters to ensure the information is correct and up to date.*

**3. Respect shown to the veteran while at the VA facility**

Nearly a third of respondents reported that they are not receiving the respect they feel they deserve during their VA medical experience. In particular, some veterans reported that the support staff were rude and disrespectful to patients.

**Were you treated with respect while at the VA facility?**

Yes:	70.7%
No:	29.3%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 164 veterans responded to this question with 116 veterans stating they were treated with respect while at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Due to recent media coverage about the John Cochran VA Medical Center and lack of respect veterans feel they receive there, these numbers indicate that some progress is being made but nearly one in three veterans still experience problematic treatment while at the VA Medical Center. Veterans reported the support staff in some instances seem rude and disrespectful to patients. Several veterans mentioned that employees often carried on personal conversations on their cell phones or with other employees instead of serving the veterans.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “Floor staff was rude, loud and very unprofessional.”
- “Some of the clerical staff are impatient.”
- “Primary care girls are on their cell phones and do not look up to help.”
- “Staff treated me like a number... and they were disrespectful to me.”

**Recommendation:** Focus on customer service training and “people skills” among all staff. Develop and implement a guideline of 4-6 principles every VA employee should practice when interacting with veterans on a daily basis.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The Medical Center is in its third year of providing initial and ongoing customer service training to all staff. Customer service and service recovery is part of the new employee orientation program. These customer service concepts are reinforced and refined during area specific orientation.*

*Following new employee orientation, all staff attends a six session customer service training entitled “**Our Turn to Serve: Caring for Our Heroes**” We are committed to practicing outstanding service with our Veterans who come to our facility for their healthcare.*

*We must live and encourage others to live our values. By serving Veterans, we will: 1) develop a deeper appreciation for their service to our country, 2) build a culture based on pride in serving Veterans, 3) personally and collectively take responsibility for the VHA’s mission and 4) make the St. Louis VA Medical Center a more gratifying place to work. The modules included in the customer service training include the following: (1) Respecting Diversity, (2) Creating Positive First Impressions, (3) Helping People Get What They Want, (4) Solving Problems and Service Recovery, and (5) Building Team Synergy.*

*Participants in the customer service training are provided with a **Customer Communication System** tool, known as “**G-VAL-HI**”. This tool is to be practiced by all employees, when interacting with Veterans. The system encourages staff to **G**reet people, **V**alue people, **A**sk how to help people, **L**isten to people, **H**elp People, and **I**nvide people and ask them if they can provide additional assistance.*

#### 4. Communication by the VA staff while the veteran was at the facility

The most common frustration among respondents was a general lack of information and clear communication from the VA staff to the patients. Over 35% of veterans felt there was a gap in the communication of medical and other information during their experience at the VA Medical Center. An area of particular concern – and one that poses a real danger to patients – concerns a lack of communication about veterans’ medications to themselves or accompanying family members or caregivers.

#### Did the VA staff communicate well with you and clearly explain what was going on?

Yes:	63.2%
No:	36.8%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 163 veterans responded to this question with 103 veterans stating the VA staff communicated effectively with them at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Since 2007, issues with communication have been the main reason veterans and their families have contacted the senate office regarding the VA medical facilities.

Several survey respondents commented that they had to ask, often repeatedly, to get a simple status update on their condition, medication, prognosis, etc. Again, many of the respondents reported a general sense of disrespect and lack of common courtesy. Some of the respondents did comment that the staff communicated well with them, but the majority of those leaving comments were not pleased with the customer service of the staff (i.e., responsiveness, thoroughness, attentiveness, etc.).

On the issue of communication, we were most concerned with potential lack of communication about veterans’ medications, including details about how to take them and manage them safely. Several comments mentioned that pharmacy and/or the discharge nurses did not explain prescribed medications. We are concerned in particular about this problem with elderly veterans or veterans who are not in a physical or mental condition to ask detailed questions about their own medications.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “Upon release, no instructions were given. They just put papers on my bedside table and said a list of my meds were on it. No instruction on insulin or blood pressure medications.”
- “Staff did not communicate with me.”
- “No explanation was given for long wait...”
- “They did not explain anything unless I questioned them.”

**Recommendation:** Provide more systematic and verifiable approach to convey specific instructions to veterans or their caretakers. Possibly develop informational sheets for each department that cover typical treatment plans to be distributed to veterans before they leave their appointments.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*Currently Veterans are contacted within 48 hours of discharge to check on the transition to their home setting. During this call Veterans are asked if they received a copy of updated medications at discharge and if they know where to call to get more information if it is needed. If a Veteran answers no to either of these questions or if the Veteran identifies any other issues, the telephone care nurse takes steps to resolve the issue and notifies the medical center for each event. Medical center staff then follows up on action to prevent the issue from happening again. In April 2011, 98.6% of the Veterans discharged received a copy of updated medication and 91% knew where to call to get more information.*

*The medical center will establish workgroups to improve the communication with Veterans discharged from the medical center by examining materials, typical treatment plans and patient teaching materials provided during the discharge process. Veterans’ focus groups will be used as part of this process.*

**5. Amount of time to be seen by a provider**

Veterans must wait to be seen once they arrive for their appointments or arrive in the emergency room. Veterans reported that a normal wait to see a provider ranges from 30 to 45 minutes after their scheduled appointment. Veterans reported they may wait upwards of 2 to 3 hours just to have their blood drawn. In addition, wait time for some emergency room visits exceeded 7 hours, just to be seen.

**Were you able to be seen by your provider in a reasonable amount of time?**

Yes:	68.7%
No:	31.3%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 163 veterans responded to this question with 112 veterans stating they were seen by their VA provider in a reasonable amount of time at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region.

Complaints about timeliness of appointments fell into two main categories. The first was the amount of time veterans must wait to be seen once they arrive for their appointments or arrive in the emergency room. Several respondents stated they normally wait over 30 to 45 minutes after their scheduled time – even when they arrive over 15 minutes early for their appointments as they are instructed. Multiple respondents noted they waited upwards of 2 to 3 hours for simple procedures, including just having their blood drawn. Veterans visiting the emergency room sometimes waited over 7 hours or greater to be seen. These reports are of great concern to this

office, especially with respect to older or otherwise infirm patients who have to manage themselves for such extremely long wait times.

The second was the issue of scheduling appointments. There appear to be inconsistent standards as to when appointments are available, how long it takes to get a follow-up, and the procedures for scheduling follow-ups whether with the veterans' primary care physician or with specialists.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- "Every time I go to that VA, it takes hours to be seen!"
- "Always 30 to 45 minute wait! Even if you are on time or before time."
- "Once again, I waited 3 hours to have my blood drawn at the CBOC."
- "As always the doctors were overloaded; they need more help."
- "I sat in the Emergency Room for 7 hours and had to come back the next day, then I waited 3 more hours and I got there at opening time 7:30 AM."
- "7 hours of waiting for me and I left without treatment, while the guy next to me spent 8 and a half hours waiting (while in severe pain) before he was seen..."

**Recommendation:** Reduce appointment wait times to 30 minutes or less. Allow no veteran to wait more than 30 minutes for simple procedures, including blood drawing. Aggressively work to improve the emergency room staffing and responsiveness to ensure that wait times are reasonable and do not subject patients to any potential physical harm.

**VA Medical Center's Response:**

*The medical center has established the expectation that Veterans will be seen within 20 minutes of their appointment time. In December 2010, the medical center implemented a Quick Card program that allows Veterans to evaluate the appointment or service they completed. One question on this Quick Card asks Veterans if they waited more than 20 minutes for appointment. The results show that 24% of the Veterans stated that they waited more than 20 minutes. Clinics receiving these responses are tasked with development and implementation of action plans to reduce the wait times and provide updates to Veterans that are waiting.*

*As an example of the efforts to reduce Veterans wait times, the Emergency Department waiting time is monitored and reported each day in Morning Report. Using this information, several improvement activities have been initiated. Recently a provider has been added to the triage area to see non-emergent Veterans. The provider in the triage area has reduced the number of Veterans waiting and ensures that the Veterans with urgent or emergent conditions are seen promptly by the Emergency Department staff.*

## 6. Cleanliness of the facility

While some of the concerns with the facility are a result of the normal wear and tear that stems from the age of the facility, continued progress is needed to address the cleanliness of the facility, especially in the restrooms.

### Rate the cleanliness of the facility you visited?

Excellent:	26.0%
Above Average (Good):	25.4%
Average/Fair:	24.3%
Below Average:	14.2%
Poor:	10.1%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 169 veterans responded to this question with 87 veterans stating the cleanliness of VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region was excellent or above average. Forty-four of the respondents stated the VA medical facility's cleanliness was excellent while 43 stated "above average," 41 stated "average," 24 stated "below average" and 17 stated "poor."

The veterans' opinions of the overall cleanliness of the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region vary greatly. Many of the veterans were very pleased with the progress made at John Cochran Division, while others listed very specific problem areas. Among the negative comments, the most cited example of unclean conditions was with the bathrooms and the waiting areas. Many of the respondents acknowledged that some of the normal wear and tear simply stems from the age of the facility.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- "The restrooms are still very dirty; no soap in most, and no sanitary napkin containers; doors don't all lock."
- "Restrooms were dirty. The whole John Cochran facility is overcrowded and over used."
- "Some of the bathrooms need to be a lot cleaner and the waiting rooms."
- "Restrooms—hallways, reception areas [were dirty]"

However, there were several veterans who reported that the VA cleaning staff does a very good a job. They wrote:

- "The staff does an excellent job keeping the hospital clean for the amount of traffic it gets on a daily basis!"
- "Always very clean!"

- “They do a great job of keeping the hospital clean, especially with the amount of traffic seen everyday.”

**Recommendation:** Improve monitoring of the cleanliness of the facility, specifically the restrooms and waiting areas, and address any maintenance issues immediately.

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**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*Housekeeping staff routinely monitor busy clinic areas and restrooms near these areas. Signs will be posted in conspicuous areas, which provide telephone numbers to call when restrooms and waiting areas need immediate attention.*

**7. Overall experience at the VA facility**

The VA medical center must focus on respect and communication at the VA medical facilities, to improve the overall experience for veterans.

**How would you rate your overall experience with the VA Medical Centers?**

Excellent:	29.1%
Above Average (Good):	13.9%
Average/Fair:	23.4%
Below Average:	17.1%
Poor:	16.5%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 158 veterans responded to this question with 68 veterans stating that their experience at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region was excellent or above average. Forty-six respondents stated their experience at the VA medical facility was “excellent,” 22 stated “above average,” 37 stated “average/fair,” 27 stated “below average” and 26 stated “poor.”

Although these numbers indicate significant issues with veterans’ overall experiences at the medical centers, there are positives. Veterans who participated in the survey reported a more favorable experience at the VA medical center than they generally report to the VA in the Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients. This is a pleasant surprise considering the recent controversy with the medical center. With that said, there is still major room for improvement. One of the veterans reported that there is no connection to veterans at John Cochran VA Medical Center. It feels cold and distant. He had difficulty finding a picture in the facility that depicted any type of military experience. Throughout the surveys, veterans have conveyed a disconnect between veterans and medical center/staff. If the VA medical center focuses on the connection between veterans and the VA medical facilities, veterans’ overall experience could improve.

**Recommendation:** Since the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program is an ongoing survey, develop a task force comprised of area veteran leaders and retired VA administrators to help implement the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program recommendations for the St. Louis VA medical centers.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The medical center will establish a workgroup comprised of Veteran service officers, Veterans and VA staff. This workgroup will meet quarterly and review and analyze information on actions, progress and results.*

**8. Willingness to recommend the VA facility to other veterans**

Some veterans indicated they have a general lack of trust in the quality of care and experienced repeated instances of frustration that ultimately led the veterans to look elsewhere for their medical care and to be reluctant to recommend the VA to other veterans.

**Would you recommend this VA facility to other veterans?**

Yes:	58.2%
No:	41.8%

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 158 veterans responded to this question with 92 veterans stating they would recommend the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region to other veterans.

Those veterans who would recommend their VA Medical center to others seemed to focus on the quality of the care itself – e.g. the treatment – rather than some of the already mentioned customer service concerns. Many also noted they have been visiting John Cochran or Jefferson Barracks for years, so their declarations of satisfaction are notable in that regard.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “Very good health care!”
- “As far as I am concerned, it is a lot better than other hospitals I have gone to mostly because of the hospital staff.”
- “I have good care there.”
- “I have recommended the hospital to several veterans, and each one I have talked to has spoken very highly of the providers and the facility.”

It should be noted however, when veterans compared John Cochran and Jefferson Barracks, that Jefferson Barracks had far more “favorable” recommendations than John Cochran, and in fact, many who received care at Jefferson Barracks specifically did so to avoid John Cochran. For those veterans who had negative comments about the medical centers and would not recommend them, the reasons focused mainly on a general lack of trust in the quality of care and repeated instances of frustration that ultimately led to the veterans looking elsewhere for their medical care.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans:

- “Because they treat you like numbers, instead of a person...”

- “Most of the problems at Cochran are management problems. The doctors and nurses are great.”
- “I want to be up front. I cannot complain really about their service. As for the medical treatment, I’m not the only patient, but they need to improve on the looks and cleanliness of all areas. And quit putting 3 people in a room, if possible!”
- “Because of the story on the news regarding the facility, I wouldn’t recommend it and I’m reconsidering having my surgery procedure there.”
- “The staff, cleanliness, parking, and operating procedures (admin) need major overhaul.”

**Recommendation:** Continue to improve communication between veterans and the VA Medical Center. Work with veterans leaders in the community to develop recommendations to improve the overall experience at the medical center. There are many veterans who are willing to donate their time and energy to work with the VA Medical Center to improve veterans’ experiences at the medical center.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*As part of the Volunteer Service program, Veterans are sought out to serve as volunteers in a wide variety of services and roles. Veterans who are interested in servicing in roles that will improve Veterans’ experience are encouraged to contact Marcena Gunter, 314-289-6393.*

*Currently, Mental Health has a Veterans’ Advisory Council. The volunteer Veterans on this council provide their advice for program planning and engage in dialog with the service leadership. This has been a well received program by the Veterans and Mental Health Service. Building on this concept, medical center will initiate a Veterans Advisory Council for the Medical Center as a whole.*



### Veterans' Recommendations

The current review disclosed various issues regarding the customer service received by veterans and other matters as presented below. This section summarizes the recommendations that veterans made to improve the VA facility they visited.

#### What could be done to improve the VA facility you visited?

Out of the 185 surveys completed, 166 veterans responded to this question with their recommendations to improve the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region. Most of the recommendations from veterans dealt with the same issues that have been outlined throughout this summary report ranging from more focus on customer service training to increased staffing in the Emergency Room.

Below are a few of the responses from veterans:

- "Focus on customer service training and 'people skills.'"
- "Improve the emergency room manning, responsiveness, etc."
- "Improve the phone and appointment system."
- "Improve parking."
- "Reward and praise the several very sincere and effective VA employees."
- "Increase use of volunteers."
- "Improve call-back / response times."
- "Make the south entrance [John Cochran Division] more handicapped-friendly – the ramp is too steep, especially when it is wet."
- "Remove the smoking area. Patients have to walk through it to avoid being run over in the valet area to get into the hospital. In fact, ban smoking on the VA hospital campus altogether, like other hospitals do."
- "It takes too long to get some appointments. Also it is hard to reach your doctor when you need to."

- “A way to get travel pay faster. Last time had to wait over an hour to get it a very long line.”
- “ER very understaffed. I don’t believe I could get surgery if I needed it. Consult referrals take too long. Hard to obtain this form, surveys should be available at all areas.”
- “Shorter wait time to see specialist.”
- “Better phone bank to handle calls. Sometime the wait is rather long.”



### Recognition of Professionalism of VA Employees by Veterans

#### Is there a provider or a department that does an excellent job that you would like Senator McCaskill to know about?

There are many great professionals within the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region, and we feel strongly that it is important they are acknowledged for their work as well. Out of the 185 surveys completed, 140 veterans responded to this question with acknowledgement of appreciation for a provider or a department at the VA medical facilities in the St. Louis region.

Below is a sample of responses from veterans. At the request of the VA, employees' names were replaced with their initials to protect their privacy. All responses, in full, were provided to the VA Administration to alert them to employees who were singled out for their professionalism and performance:

- “My brother-in-law committed suicide last week, and the suicide prevention team of J.T. and B.O. were invaluable in keeping me from suicide, myself.”
- “Dr. H.H. in the primary medical clinic at JB. She’s a saint! Dr. L. at John Cochran’s Mental Health Clinic is a saint also. Dr. F.M. is a cool dude – pardon the expression – also at the Mental Health Clinic at John Cochran.”
- “Dr. K. has provided excellent services and has been a life changer for me.”
- “Dr. D. has helped me with all my health and mental concerns.”
- “B.O. in suicide prevention needs an award! And Ms. R.N., the Director, and K.F. in the women's clinic all need awards of excellence. B.O. always goes above and beyond as well.”
- “J.H. & S.D. have helped me with a couple of issues that I could not resolve myself. Always they are very, very helpful!”
- “The PTSD clinic for OIF/OEF vets has got their act together, and Dr. S.O. is great with PTSD vets.”
- “The Optometry Department and Doctor S., Nurse S. and T. I would also like to mention V. in the travel reimbursement office. He is very nice and professional.”
- “Dr. T. in neurology is an excellent physician. He and his team have always exceeded my expectations.”
- “Dr. G.B, Dr. R.B., and Nurse Coordinators P.A. and M.B.”

- “Jefferson Barracks Rehab is wonderful.”
- “The entire mental health clinic at JB clinic. They treat me good, my provider is P. G.. The whole staff always treats us with respect. Dr. C.F. at the Women's Health Clinic.”
- “The OEF/OIF PTSD Clinic at Jefferson Barracks does all they can to take care of us with such sensitive needs and not make us feel like we have "mental issues" because of the effects we suffer from the war. Especially Dr. M.”
- “I want to give the Blue Ortho clinic an “A+” because they try their best!”
- “Dr. R.D., Dr. L.M., & Dr. S.”
- “I have direct dealings with the doctors and staff at Cochran's Dental, Arthritis, and Orthopedic Departments. They have all been caring and professional in their approach to medicine and patients. I look forward to having bi-lateral knee replacement at Cochran ASAP. Please get things moving there again ASAP!”
- “Dental and Mental Health... The PTSD doctors have also saved my life. They have helped turn my life around from a nightmare in hell to what I hope is now a very positive productive individual. All of the staff at VA Hospitals go way out of their way to stay in touch and give us the personal attention that many outside hospitals never provide.”
- “My primary care Doctor V. at Jefferson Barracks is a devoted professional who really watches out for me, and makes me get tests and follow-up.”
- “I have two: Dr. D. and Dr. K. They both do a great job. I wish all the staff would do as good a job as they do.”
- “The PTSD staff is awesome.”
- “I haven't been dissatisfied so far- my husband also goes to the podiatry, optometry, and audiology. I am very satisfied with the care I have received.”
- “I would like to commend B.B., a nurse practitioner in the geriatric clinic. He works very hard making sure patients are well taken care of and the clinic is run efficiently.”
- “Dr. H.H. at Jefferson Barracks has always displayed concern and interest in her patients. I have been seeing her for about 5 years and think so highly of her that I transferred my primary care from Cochran to JB to remain in her care. Also Dr. J.C. - Vascular Surgeon. This man is a dedicated pioneer in his profession and I would (again) trust my life to him.”
- “Dr. M., Dr. C., S. (we LOVE S.) in the OIF/OEF PTSD Clinic, the entire Polytrauma unit at JBVA, especially E.H. and C.H.---Know how to treat patients. These are wonderful people, and could be a huge advantage if they were made examples for employees to follow. Especially S., he, well, I just can't say enough about him. He is a treasure.”

- “The St. Charles CBOC work very hard at being accommodating and efficient.”

**Recommendation:** The St. Louis VA Medical Center is fortunate to have so many competent, compassionate professionals. Reward and acknowledge superior employees for their service and job well-done.

**VA Medical Center’s Response:**

*The medical center will continue its practice of acknowledging and recognizing employees that are called out by Veterans for their compassion and service. Veteran letters and comments are read at morning report, employees receive a personal letter from the Director, and recognized by their work group and comments are posted on the electronic bulletin board.*



### Conclusion

The Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program in the St. Louis region is off to a good start. This summary report provides details of ways the VA can improve veterans' experiences at the VA medical facilities. This is the first step in improving veterans experience at the VA medical center in the St. Louis region. The veterans who filled out the survey provided honest, constructive information regarding their experiences at the VA medical facilities during their recent visits. With this information, we compiled a summary report that reflected veterans' experiences and concerns at these facilities.

The Survey of Healthcare Experience of Patients report has provided the VA with a general overview of veterans' overall quality of care. The Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program survey will provide the VA with some very specific examples of the quality of the veterans' experience at the St. Louis Region VA facilities.

It is clear from the surveys that work is needed to improve veterans' experiences regarding customer service at the St. Louis Region VA Medical Center. The VA has provided responses that indicate that they are taking veterans' concerns seriously and are implementing procedures to streamline the scheduling of appointments, address cleanliness and way-finding at the VA facilities, and improve communication with the veterans. The addition of a workgroup comprised of veteran service officers, veterans and VA staff that will meet quarterly and review and analyze information on actions, progress and results will provide a blueprint for giving veterans the quality customer service they deserve.

In order to maintain this momentum, we need to continue to work together to identify areas of concern at the VA medical centers, to address the issues and to improve the quality of service that we provide to our veterans.

We encourage our veterans to continue to fill out the surveys as their participation in the Veterans Customer Satisfaction Program is essential to the success of the program. The senate office will compile the summary reports and the VA medical center's response on a quarterly basis.

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