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VA Acting Secretary Gibson Announces Immediate Actions to Improve Veterans' Access to Care in Columbia, South Carolina

COLUMBIA, S.C. – Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Sloan D. Gibson today announced additional actions to improve Veterans' access to care at the William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center, in Columbia, S.C.

"No Veteran should have to wait for the care and services that they have earned and deserve," said Acting Secretary Gibson. "The audit and the data we released last week showed the extent of the problems we face across the country and here in Columbia, South Carolina. We have been in the midst of our accelerated access to care initiative. It was focused on Veterans who have waited the longest for care.
We are moving to address those issues here in South Carolina and across the Nation. We are fully committed to fixing these problems and understand that we must restore the public's trust in the VA. More importantly, we must restore the trust of our Veterans who depend on us for care."

In addition to the system-wide actions taken in response to the audit findings and data, Gibson outlined actions to accelerate access to care for Veterans in William Jennings Bryan Dorn VA Medical Center:

- The Dorn VA Medical Center is reaching out to all Veterans identified as waiting for care to get them off of wait lists and into clinics: As of July 7, VA has reached out to more than 3,800 Veterans.

- The Dorn VAMC has created over 1,700 new appointment slots in July and Augusta to accelerate access by expanding hours and increasing overtime, adding evenings and weekend hours.
- Night and weekend appointments have been added for the rehabilitation clinic.
- Optometry and orthopedics have added hours for new patients.
- Saturday appointments have been added for primary care & dental.
- Gibson directed that the VAMC use temporary staffing measures & clinical and administrative support to ensure Veterans receive care they have earned.
- VHA will ensure that almost $680,000 from within VA's budget is used specifically to accelerate access to care at the Dorn VAMC.
- Gibson directed that the VAMC increase the use of established contracts with community partners to schedule Veterans for appointments.
- The Dorn VA Medical Center has been adding necessary clinic space to allow Veterans to receive the care they need:
    - In March 2013, a new state-of-the-art ICU was constructed adding 21 more beds.
    - In July 2013, a new Out-Patient Clinic opened in Greenville to serve Upstate Veterans.
- Last September, a new 14-bed Hospice Unit opened and in December, a free standing clinic especially for Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. This one-stop-shop will provide mental health care, primary care, social work and spiritual services.
- There are plans for additional space at the Dorn VA Medical Center as well.

On June 9, VA announced the following actions in response to the nationwide Access Audit findings and data:

- **Establishing New Patient Satisfaction Measurement Program**
  Gibson has directed VHA to immediately begin developing a new patient satisfaction measurement program to provide real-time, robust, location-by-location information on patient satisfaction, to include satisfaction data of those

Veterans attempting to access VA healthcare for the first time. This program will be developed with input from Veterans Service Organizations, outside healthcare organizations, and other entities. This will ensure VA collects an additional set of data – directly from the Veteran's perspective – to understand how VA is doing throughout the system.

- **Holding Senior Leaders Accountable**
  Where audited sites identify concerns within the parent facility or its affiliated clinics, VA will trigger administrative procedures to ascertain the appropriate follow-on personnel actions for specific individuals.
- **Ordering an Immediate VHA Central Office and VISN Office Hiring Freeze**
  Gibson has ordered an immediate hiring freeze at the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) central office in Washington D.C. and the 21 VHA Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) regional offices, except for critical positions to be approved by the Secretary on a case-by-case basis. This action will begin to remove bureaucratic obstacles and establish responsive, forward leaning leadership.
- **Removing 14-Day Scheduling Goal**
  VA is eliminating the 14-day scheduling goal from employee performance plans. This action will eliminate incentives to engage in inappropriate scheduling practices or behaviors.
- **Increasing Transparency by Posting Data Twice-Monthly**
  At the direction of the Acting Secretary, VHA will post regular updates to the access data released today at the middle and end of each month at VA.gov. Twice-monthly data updates will enhance transparency and provide the most immediate information to Veterans and the public on Veterans access to quality healthcare.
- **Initiating an Independent, External Audit of Scheduling Practices**
  Gibson has also directed that an independent, external audit of system-wide VHA scheduling practices be performed.
- **Utilizing High Performing Facilities to Help Those That Need Improvement**

VA will formalize a process in which high performing facilities provide direct assistance and share best practices with facilities that require improvement on particular medical center quality and efficiency, also known as SAIL, performance measures.

- **Suspending Performance Awards**

  VA has suspended all VHA senior executive performance awards for FY2014.

Gibson's visit to the Dorn VA Medical Center is part of his continuing site visits to VA facilities across the country where he is hearing directly from Veterans and employees about obstacles to providing timely, quality care, and how VA can immediately address them.

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