



THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON

April 10, 2008

The Honorable Kay Bailey Hutchison  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Hutchison:

Thank you for your letter of concern and questions regarding the El Paso VA Health Care System (EPVAHCS).

The report referenced in your letter provides quarterly data on access, clinical care and patient satisfaction at VA medical centers. Based on the FY 2007 quarterly results for El Paso, the facility and Veterans Integrated Service Network 18 developed an action plan to improve services for the El Paso area veterans.

Attached is a summary of actions being taken to ensure EPVAHCS provides quality health care to their veterans and improves system performance. As an example of a significant action to improve performance, the facility secured the assistance of a national consultation team in September 2007 to help their primary care staff improve access to care and reduce waiting times. As a result, in February 2008, 100% of primary care patients were seen within 30 days.

In addition, arrangements have been made for VA's National Center for Organizational Development to visit EPVAHCS within the next two weeks. This week-long review process will provide additional consultation for the staff on ways to enhance employee morale and performance.

Thank you for your continued support and concern for the welfare of our Nation's veterans.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Peake", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

James B. Peake, M.D.

Enclosure

**Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)  
Veterans Health Administration (VHA)**

**Summary of Actions Being Taken at the El Paso VA Health Care System  
to Improve Health Care Delivery and System Performance**

The action plan developed by the El Paso VA Health Care System (EPVAHCS) includes five major areas of concern: access to care, customer service, telephone responsiveness, employee morale and the organizational culture. The following summary provides the actions, goals and timelines for continued improvement.

**Access to care:**

The EPVAHCS secured the assistance of a national consultation team in September 2007 to help their primary care staff work on improving access to care. For February 2008, 100% of EPVAHCS primary care patients were seen within 30 days. For specialty care, 97% were seen within 30 days. Although these numbers are favorable, EPVAHCS anticipates a slight decline for a short time due to the unanticipated loss of providers at both the Las Cruces Community Based Outpatient Clinic and the El Paso facility. Additional staff has been authorized in both primary care and specialty care areas to assist in continuing to improve access. EPVAHCS is currently recruiting for 142 staff, of which 107 are new positions. Since November 2007, 39 new employees have been hired. It is anticipated that all approved positions will be hired by February 2009. Facility leadership will ask the national consultation team to return to assist with implementation of Advanced Clinic Access in specialty care in July 2008. EPVAHCS has a goal of achieving 98% of specialty care patients seen within 30 days by September 2008 and 99% by December 2008.

EPVAHCS continues to move forward with an after hours clinic. In March 2008, pharmacy hours were extended to cover the later hours of operation. Due to concerns about the safety of patients, EPVAHCS determined that urgent care needs are best provided in partnership with William Beaumont Army Medical Center (WBAMC) since they operate an Emergency Care unit. EPVAHCS has initiated discussions with WBAMC to jointly staff an urgent care center that will provide urgent care during both normal clinic hours and also evenings and weekends. It is anticipated that this process will be initiated by September 2008.

**Customer service:**

A customer service program has been initiated to educate staff about expectations for professional interactions with customers. A systems redesign team was launched in December 2007 and Patient Advocate Liaisons have been identified in each clinic area. A "quick card" system was instituted in February 2008. This system provides immediate feedback to each team about veterans' perceptions of the service being provided. EPVAHCS plans to have 75% of their staff educated about the customer service standards by June 2008 and 100% no later than September 2008. EPVAHCS has a goal of achieving a 2% improvement in customer service scores by the end of the fiscal year and 5% improvement by the second quarter of FY 09.

**Telephone responsiveness:**

Telephone equipment was installed on February 28, 2008. Data from the new system became available during March 2008. Of the eight Automated Call Data center (ACD) groups that exist at EPVACS, five are currently meeting the target of responding by three rings (15 seconds). The areas that are not meeting the target include scheduling, pharmacy and telephone link care (nurse advice unit). As a result of the initial data, a decision was made to add staff to primary care, pharmacy and the telephone operations units (scheduling, nurse care and the switchboard). A systems redesign team for telephone responsiveness was initiated to explore both the hardware and human factor issues related to the telephone system and has a long term goal of answering all calls by the third ring. EPVAHCS has intermediate targets of reducing the time to respond to calls by 10% each month until they achieve the target.

**Employee morale:**

Employee morale is important to EPVAHCS. The national VA All Employee Survey data shows that employees rated their overall satisfaction as 3.8, 3.7 and 3.7 (on a scale of 1 to 5); the results show that satisfaction is stable. This compares to the national satisfaction level of 3.77. Employee turnover rates were 11.295 in FY 06 and 11.698 in FY 07; the workforce is stable. EPVAHCS became a participant in the national Civility, Respect and Engagement in the Workplace (CREW) initiative approximately two years ago. They have participated in three cycles and are starting the fourth cycle soon. Over a third of the staff has been a part of this program to date (the highest participation rate in the VISN). The management team has held "fireside chats" with several services and has a goal of 100% participation each fiscal year. EPVAHCS has worked with the National Center for Organizational Development to hold an annual management retreat, supplemented by quarterly retreats with front line staff to engage employees at all levels of the organization in strategic planning and follow up of ongoing improvement efforts.

**Organizational culture:**

The management team has instituted several new processes in an effort to lead changes in the way that staff interacts with veterans and each other. The management team benchmarked with other facilities and established a daily morning meeting with facility managers to encourage communication about issues as they develop and to communicate expectations. EPVAHCS has held several all employee meetings to discuss corporate expectations that both supervisors and staff adhere to national standards and expectations.