Congressman McNerney’s Veteran Town Hall Notes July 31, 2018

Speaker Panel:
- Thomas J. Fitzgerald, III, Director, VA Palo Alto Health Care System (VA Palo Alto)
- Col. David G. Ray, District Commander, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- Linda Finley, Deputy, Project Management, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)
- Bill Ulibarri, Director, Office of Construction and Facility Management (OCFM)

1. **What is the reason for the delay in opening the new Stockton Clinic?**

   USACE and OCFM had to move the construction award timeframe from Fall 2018 to the Summer of 2019. There are certain details on the design and agreements for utilities that need to be addressed. The award timeframe given is worst case scenario as we hope to address the issues quickly to award construction as soon as possible.

2. **Have Preferred Labor Agreements (PLA) been considered for the project?**

   Yes. Market research was done by the US Army Corps of Engineers and recommendations were made against the need for PLAs. At Congressman McNerney’s request, USACE will reconsider PLAs.

3. **What collaboration has occurred between the VA, USACE, and OCFM to ensure transparency?**

   OCFM is part of VA and works closely with the Facility Management team at VA Palo Alto. Since USACE took over this project, both VA Palo Alto and OCFM have worked closely with their team to address issues and push this project forward.

   For example, VA Palo Alto and OCFM have been working with the city to address utilities issues to ensure that USACE can focus on other tasks. Also, USACE has a joint commission project that ensures we include relevant stakeholders, such as county, city officials, as the project progresses.

4. **What is the status of the progress regarding construction utilities?**

   The City of Stockton has agreed to construct the utilities for this project to meet their specific standards and has assured VA it will complete in time for the clinic to open on the advertised timeframe. The agreement also allows OCFM meet the city’s utility standards while helping to remove barriers for USACE to move forward with the project.

5. **How many Veterans live in San Joaquin County?**

   There are 22,109 Veterans in the San Joaquin County that are eligible for VA care.
6. How many homeless Veterans are there in San Joaquin County?

The last public data on the Point-in-Time count in January 2017 showed 109 homeless Veterans in San Joaquin County. New data will be available in January 2019.

7. How many Veterans are served by the Stockton VA Clinic?

In Fiscal Year 2017, the Stockton VA Clinic saw 8,274 Veterans; so far in Fiscal Year 2018, the Stockton VA Clinic has seen 7,462 Veterans.

8. What is the main mental health service seen at Stockton?

Veterans seeking mental health services at the Stockton VA Clinic are mainly being treated for PTSD, depression or a combination of both, due to the large portion of Veterans being Combat Veterans.

9. Veterans need dental services. How can we provide these services? Where are dental services available if Veterans that are eligible for dental benefits?

Based on current legislature, dental service is only available to Veterans who are eligible, including but not limited to 100% Service Connected (SC) or a SC dental condition. However, dental eligibility can depend on several factors. Visit www.vets.gov/health-care/about-va-health-care/dental-care/ to learn more.

Dental services with the VA Palo Alto Health Care System are available at our Livermore Division, Palo Alto Division, Menlo Park Division, and through contracted community providers.

10. With the pending closure of the Livermore Division, will the new Stockton clinic provide the same services? What community contracts are we going to have?

The new clinic will provide the same services as the current Stockton clinic. However, using our Model of Care study, we will be looking at where, when and how we can provide other services to our Veterans through VA and in the community, aligning with the Mission Act.

11. I’m a Veteran and have private insurance. Would it be a good idea for me to cancel my Kaiser health benefits?

We encourage all Veterans to sign up and see what they are eligible for. You can visit www.vets.gov/health-care/eligibility/ to find eligibility criteria and how to apply.

12. What systems will be in place to ensure that the Stockton workers and/or Veterans will be considered for the new clinic contract?

There are legal requirements for our contractor to have a goal of subcontracting with Veteran-owned businesses, but there is no specific law or regulation that states Veterans must be hired individually for work on construction projects.

13. Will the new clinic serve Tuolumne County and Angels Camp?
14. The Office of the Inspector General has reported deficiencies with VA including not having competitive salaries for clinical staff. What are we doing to improve salaries for providers?

By law, VA cannot pay providers more than what the President makes. However, there are some ways we try to make up for it. For example, we can pay retention incentives (bonuses) to keep staff. The VA Mission Act of 2018 that was recently passed provided an increase of the education debt reduction amount available through the federal Education Debt Reduction Program (EDRP) from $120,000 to $200,000 over five years and $24,000 to $40,000 annually, and allows Vet Center employees to participate in the Program. The EDRP aims to increase the number of qualified health care professionals for positions that are difficult to recruit or retain in the VA by providing student loan reimbursements.

15. What is the VA doing regarding to ensure prompt payment to community providers?

Section 111 of the VA Mission Act of 2018 establishes a prompt payment process that requires VA to pay for, or deny payment for, services within 30 calendar days of receipt of a clean electronic claim or within 45 calendar days of receipt of a clean paper claim.

The bill establishes a prompt payment standard to ensure reimbursements from VA to third-party care providers, including county owned and supported health care facilities, are paid in a timely manner and requires VA to pay interest on any late payments.

16. John is on heart transplant list and has had to seek community care multiple times. His bills have added up to over $100,000, resulting in collections. He is trying to find out who to go to regarding his bills.

A Community Care Call Center has been set up for Veterans experiencing adverse credit reporting or debt collection resulting from inappropriately billed Choice Program claims. Veterans experiencing these problems can call 1-877-881-7618 (9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern Time) for assistance.

17. Were the delays in construction of the new Stockton clinic due to funding or flooding?

No, delays were not due to either of those factors. The change in construction timeline was due to technical design issues that must be addressed by USACE and coming to an agreement with the city of Stockton to provide utilities to the project.

18. What is the VA doing to expand the list of presumptive diseases associated with exposure (i.e. Agent Orange)?

Former VA Secretary David Shulkin submitted an expansion of Agent Orange-related health care to the Office of Management and Budget in November 2017. To date, there has been no update on a decision. VA also recommends Veterans to work with their local congressional representative to help advocate for these changes.

19. Are the panel members willing to attend another town hall in January 2019?

Yes.
Yes! VA, OCFM and USACE will coordinate with the Congressman’s office to confirm a date in January.