VFW Town Halls Confirm VA Issues Extend Far Beyond Waitlists

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On Monday, national leadership and representatives from the VFW held two separate town hall meetings in an effort to gain more insight into the issues veterans are facing at local Baltimore and Kansas City VA medical centers by hearing directly from veterans who rely on them for care. More than 100 veterans attended each town hall and though the events were hosted more than 1,000 miles apart, the primary issues were the same.

It's no surprise that wait times for appointments were certainly a concern to many veterans in attendance. "The only thing you're waiting on at the VA is a funeral," said one veteran. However, the most prevalent criticism of VA medical facilities was that of customer service. "Curt, rude" and "very unfriendly" were just a few words used to describe VA facility representatives. From the information booth, to schedulers, to doctors, veterans say they get the sense that VA staff members simply don't care about their needs or proper treatment.

"These are NOT the kind of people we need at our VA," said one veteran after recounting his story of not being properly informed of a potentially life-threatening illness. "My doctor didn't care to tell me about some test results. I found out from another department and when I asked why he didn't tell me, he said 'I didn't think it was important.' They just want the problems to go away."

"Laurie," the mother of an Army veteran of the war in Afghanistan who lost her son to suicide, said the VA should carry that burden. "He suffered from TBI and PTSD and wasn't getting the help he needed while active. He was, as they say, self-medicating. I took him to the VA within five days of discharge and you walk in, you don't have a clue where to start, they send you running around the building. It's frustrating, and I wasn't the one suffering," she said while holding back tears. "There's no communication on how to acclimate to the VA system. You have to learn by trial and error."

Access to medication was also a resounding concern of veterans, including "Joe," a Vietnam veteran who suffers illness from Agent Orange exposure and is currently just days into a 120-day wait until his next appointment. "I'm going to run out of my medication before my next appointment and there's nothing I can do. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Nicole," a Gulf War veteran told a much different story about her access to medication. Having severely injured her back while serving, she was given morphine injections to ease the pain until surgery could repair the damage. During her months of waiting for surgery, she continued to receive morphine injections and soon developed an addiction. During what would be her last visit to the doctor pre-surgery, she was told she would be receiving yet

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another morphine injection. “I don’t want any more morphine! I’m an addict. I want my back fixed!” she said. She was then referred to a psychologist to deal with her addiction; surgery is still pending.

For a combined five hours, veterans relayed their concerns not only about medication and customer care, but also their lack of access to urgent care, misinterpreted lab results, misdiagnosis and inaccurate or missing paperwork.

The recent town halls are part of the VFW’s nationwide effort to gain personal insight into a number of VA medical facilities across the nation. In addition to the town halls, the VFW has enacted a feedback line, 1-800-VFW-1899, to record veterans’ feedback on their care received, and has deployed its nationwide network of VFW Service Officers to visit with veterans onsite in VA waiting rooms.

“The VA system is broken, but certainly not beyond repair, and the VFW has vowed to be a part of the fix,” said VFW Adjutant General John Hamilton. “Most veterans don’t have the means to deliver their message directly to Congress, so the VFW will do it for them. No more politics. No more games. We won’t stand for it. Our nation’s veterans deserve the very best, and we won’t settle for anything less.”