

BRIAN J. MAST
21ST DISTRICT, FLORIDA

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-0918

May 13, 2024

Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, DC 20571

David Isaacks
Network Director
VA Sunshine Healthcare Network (VISN 8)
13000 Bruce B. Downs Blvd
Tampa, FL 33612

Secretary McDonough,

I am writing to you because I am concerned about the mental health of our veterans. In recent months, my office has been inundated with calls and emails from veterans upset about being denied access to their current community mental health physicians.

Veterans are reporting that the West Palm Beach VA Medical Center is refusing to authorize their requests to continue community-based care. In particular, veterans say the West Palm Beach VAMC will no longer cover referrals to outside mental health care providers.

This is a departure from a long-standing practice. For years, the Department of Veterans Affairs has allowed veterans to receive outside care because of an inability to retain adequate mental health professionals. This flexibility allowed veterans to escape the poor experiences they previously had within the VA's network, including frequent last-minute cancellations for appointments to high-turnover rates among mental health staff.

Despite that troubling record, my office is now hearing that veterans are being denied access to their preferred mental health care providers. As of January, we've been contacted by over 70 veterans, relatives, and mental health providers about this matter.

As a veteran who lost his legs in Afghanistan, this is extremely troubling to hear from my brothers and sisters in uniform. Like any individual, veterans do not want to lose access to their doctors, especially after having built trust and personal relationships over years of treatment. In the case of veterans battling post-traumatic stress, these disruptions could have irreparable damage and cause them to relapse.

It takes time for any individual, not just a veteran, to feel comfortable enough with a mental health provider to discuss their traumas and afflictions. By forcing these veterans away from their current providers against their wishes, the WPB VAMC would make veterans relive events and situations that have left them with deep wounds. This is not a risk we can afford to take given that the suicide rate among veterans remains unacceptably high and is on the rise.

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I believe that veterans deserve the flexibility to choose from who and where they receive their mental health services. Veterans want to go where they are valued and respected. Unfortunately, the West Palm Beach VAMC, due to high turnover and inferior service, has not shown in the past that this is something it can provide.

The brave men and women who put on this country's uniform should get the care they earned and deserve. I ask that you answer the following questions:

1. Why has the West Palm Beach VAMC begun denying veterans access to their outside mental health providers?
2. Is the recent surge in community care authorization refusals due to a change in policy within the VA?
3. If a veteran desires to remain with a community-care mental health provider, and their community provider supports continued treatment, will the VA honor that request?
4. In light of the documented shortage of mental health professionals within the VA system, why does the department continue to restrict veterans' access to community-based care where such professionals are more readily available?
5. How does the VA justify its denial of community-based mental health care to veterans, especially when it often results in prolonged wait times and exacerbation of their mental health conditions?
6. How does the VA reconcile its obligation to provide timely, effective, and comprehensive mental health care to veterans with its ongoing refusal to fully utilize community-based resources, which are often more accessible and responsive to veterans' needs?
7. What steps is the VA taking to ensure that veterans who are unable to access timely mental health care within the VA system are promptly referred to and supported in obtaining care from community providers?
8. Given the growing recognition of the importance of holistic, community-integrated approaches to mental health care, why does the VA persist in maintaining policies that limit veterans' access to the full spectrum of available resources, including community-based services?

Please respond by May 20, 2024.

Sincerely,



Brian Mast
Member of Congress