



VA CARIBBEAN HEALTHCARE SYSTEM | SAN JUAN, PR

Date: April 6-9, 2015

Director of VA&R: Louis Celli

Assistant Director of Health Care: April Commander

Overview

The VA Caribbean Healthcare System (VCHS) provides services to a population of 150,000 veterans in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In addition to their main facility in San Juan, they offer services in two multispecialty clinics and four community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC). These clinics are located in: Arecibo, Mayagüez, Guayama, Ponce, St. Croix, St. Thomas, Utuado, Ceiba, Comerio, and Vieques¹.

Town Hall Meeting

On Monday, April 6, 2015, Verna Jones, the Executive Director of The American Legion's D.C. office, moderated the town hall meeting. There were approximately 35-40 persons in attendance. The following were some of the concerns and questions that were addressed with regards to the health care and other benefits sought within the VCHS:

1. One veteran mentioned that there is a breakdown in communication between the VA and the post office with regards to flags. The flags are not being supplied or restocked at or by the post office. However, it was pointed out that this is a responsibility of the VA to manage the flags, and a mere agreement was established by a Memorandum of Understanding with the post office.
2. There is a growing concern of just how many patient appointments are being cancelled by the facility without the patient's knowledge, only to have the patient reschedule the same appointment. Basically, appointments that do not exist are being made, then cancelled to give the perception that the initial appointment was under 30 days. However, VA staff stated that the cancelled appointments are tracked, as well as the impact on patients. Also, there are many reasons for facility to cancel appointment and in order for facility to cancel an appointment, it must be approved by the Chief of Staff.
3. American Legion Department Service Officer Migdalia Melton, Post 48's commander, asked, "Has anything had been done about the telephone system at the VA hospital?" VA staff responded that, "There were problems with the phones, and they recently transferred to Internet service, so it's a work in progress. Also, the hours have been extended from 0630-1830, and additional staff has been hired to provide live contact.
4. There were complaints about the apparent exclusion of Puerto Rico from VA's Choice Card program. "Just recently I received this card, and it has no value for us right now," said Jose Valenzuela, a Vietnam War veteran from the town of Ponce. Jones, told attendees that the Choice Card does apply to veterans on the island. "There is no provision in the law that says Puerto Rico is exempt – that's absolutely not true," Jones said. Duane Hamlin, director of the VA medical center in San Juan, said that confusion about the Choice Card program existed nationally and that Puerto Rico "is no different than anywhere else in the nation. The Choice program applies similarly here as anywhere else." Executive Director Jones said that she and Louis Celli, Director of Veteran Affairs and Rehabilitation Division, will be speaking with officials at VA's Central Office in Washington, D.C., about problems with the Choice Card "and get that squared away, because the program is a law and veterans are entitled to that. Veterans shouldn't be confused about a program that is designed to be advantageous."
5. Congressman Pedro Pierluisi stated that the appeals board only comes once a year and it should be twice. Also, current VA mental health professional service is decreased in Puerto Rico vs. the mainland. Additionally, construction is going well.
6. A veteran asked about job training for veterans. Director Celli responded with information on the presidential initiative for newly discharged veterans.
7. VA staff voiced that a job fair was held to recruit pharmacy technicians to decrease backlog on refilling prescriptions.

1 "About the VA Caribbean Healthcare System <http://www.caribbean.va.gov/about/index.asp>



Executive Leadership

On Tuesday, April 7, 2015, The American Legion's staff met with VCHS staff to discuss challenges the facility endures. VCHS is a part of VISN 8 and has 10 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOCs): Ponce, Mayaguez, St. Croix, St. Thomas, Arecibo, Ceiba, Utuado, Comerio, Vieques and Guayama. However, there are only three Vet Centers for all of Puerto Rico. The San Juan facility, on average, sees roughly 57,500 unique patients and 438,600 outpatient visits, according to the April 2014 VA Office of Inspector General Report. VCHS Director, DeWayne Hamlin, reported the veteran population to be somewhere between 120,000 and 150,000, but an accurate count is needed. He also mentioned the homeless population, which the current number is unknown but is believed to be significant. No domiciliary is available, and there is a homeless outreach coordinator on the campus who manages the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)/Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) program.

Wait times for new primary care patients is minimal, but orthopedics service appointments prove difficult to obtain within the guidelines due to an island-wide shortage of orthopedic specialists. Also, sleep study test are a challenge as well, as technicians are not certified, which results in poor test results, repeated tests and delayed results (if they have to be relayed/transcribed to another facility to be read). Recently, 160 other positions were filled – 54 by veterans. The physicians' needs are unmet in orthopedics and neurology departments, but the hospitalist and mental health positions were in good standing. Recruitment incentives for physicians were not discussed.

Chief of Staff Dr. Antonio Sanchez informed The American Legion of the separate Mental Health Emergency Room that is operable 24/7. He also spoke of the expansion of the radiology and oncology clinics.

The VCHS staff spoke of the difficulties with prosthetics even though there is a lab on site; larger or specialty items must be ordered and sent in from the mainland. Shipping delays are held up, as the Conex must be full in order to be placed on the barges, which must have the U.S. flag on them. Also, barges are servicing other islands as well. In most cases, it takes approximately two months to fill a large Conex container.

Hamlin spoke in general terms about the facility, stating that the facility has \$500 million to \$1 billion in revenue; the pending deconstruction of the main building down to the second floor is set for next year. The facility is able to sustain power for 10 or more days from generator power. According to Hamlin, service requirements are not based on budget but on the needs of the veterans, and discussed ongoing challenges regarding annual budgeting needs and the unique circumstances the Caribbean Healthcare Network faces regarding unusually high energy/electric costs. Because of this unique need, the system receives bailouts for budget shortfalls every year; according to Hamlin the veterans are not affected.

The deputy director of the hospital, Nayda Ramirez-Garcia, pointed out during fiscal 2014 that \$30 million were spent on contracted care for the Choice Card Program nationally – a program, The American Legion learned, has not been used in Puerto Rico at all. Also, the deputy director reported that the civilian physicians in the Virgin Islands refuse to treat veterans, a claim The American Legion has not heard previously and will require additional research and investigation.

The staff spoke of the women's clinic and the availability of mammograms on site with results available online; civilian providers release results via hard copy or CD, and VA tracks patients that are fee-based.

Mayaguez Outpatient Clinic

The Mayagüez Clinic is a Satellite of the San Juan VAMC, and was established in 1976 to improve access to Primary Care services for veterans in the western part of Puerto Rico. The clinic currently provide a wide variety of services:

- Primary Care and Nursing Care
- General Psychiatry
- Surgical Consultation and Minor Surgery
- Urology and Cystoscopy
- Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, including Occupational and Physical Therapy
- Cardiology, including Echocardiography, Stress Test and Holter
- Gastroenterology Consultation and Procedures (Endoscopy, Colonoscopy & Sigmoidoscopy)



- Dental
- Ophthalmology and Optometry
- Laboratory
- X-Ray and Sonography
- Spirometry
- Pharmacy
- Dietetics Evaluation and Counseling
- Social Work
- Prescriptions: Routine prescriptions processed through the mail or My HealthVet.
- Podiatry Services²

On Wednesday, April 8, 2015, The American Legion's National Headquarters staff, and representatives from The American Legion's Department of Puerto Rico met at the Mayaguez Clinic to voice issues and concerns that affect veterans and employees of the clinic. Upon arrival, the Legion was greeted by the members of Legion Post 47 in Cabo Rojos, PR, who shared their concerns regarding care received from the Mayaguez Clinic and within the VA Caribbean Healthcare System (VCHS). Some of the complaints were:

1. "The new clinic is triple the size of the old one. However, security remains the same. There are two DoD police officers and one security guard. Not enough to cover the area. There are extended hours on Wednesdays and Saturdays and there is only one DoD police officer for the entire building. Both DoD officers are military reservists and there is no replacement when they have drills. Anytime a replacement is sent from San Juan area, they have to pay them overtime."
2. "Mental health- The number of psychiatrists and psychologists is the same since 1987. The number of mental health patients has tripled. They are one of the clinics that stays open during extended hours and are very concerned about the lack of security. They are requesting a day hospital so that they any psychiatry patients can be held there instead of being sent to a non-VA facility."
3. "The laboratory is still taking too long. We have veterans who are diabetic, and their health is at risk since there is no consideration on how long they have waited."
4. "The phone system is set up so that all calls enter into San Juan and are routed to the clinic that is called. It is almost impossible to get through and if you do not have extension numbers the call is dropped. This causes too many no-shows."
5. "We have specialty clinics, such as cardiovascular, dermatology, urology and podiatry. However, there are no doctors or staff available. In addition, we have no X-ray capability. MRI is out in cardiology."
6. "There is not sufficient geriatric care. The population of elderly veterans is mostly located in the western side of the island. Distribution of funds for the geriatric department needs to be reevaluated because there is not enough funding to cover the needs of our elderly."
7. "There is no ability to stabilize someone during an emergency. There is no ambulance in the clinic. An ambulance must be called so that any emergency can be transported to the nearest hospital."
8. "It takes more than three months to get appointments for physical therapy, psychiatry, surgeries, i.e., knee surgeries. It's almost impossible to obtain approval for fee basis for surgeries, colonoscopy."
9. "We had one primary doctor who attended over 2000 walk-in cases last year. Instead of applauding him, he was reprimanded."
10. Veterans also complain that the clinic closes at 1800; however the clinic does open on Saturday from 0800 -1630, which are part of the extended hours. The regular hours are:

M-F: 0700-1630

Wednesday: 0700-1830

2 Mayaguez Outpatient Clinic <http://www.caribbean.va.gov/locations/Mayaguez.asp>



Saturday: 0800-1630

The Legion was told by staff that it can take up to four hours for an ambulance to arrive to the clinic due to shortages of vehicles on the island. However, there is a pilot program for travel in place from Mayaguez to San Juan, and the clinic is accountable for the veterans. The catchment area is approximately 90,000 veterans, with little over 9,000 unique veterans for a market penetration of 10 percent. The daily outpatient appointments average is about 1,600. The staff also reported the pharmacy is the most used in the VISN and mail order is being pushed due to culture (as veterans want to see the doctor when it's really not necessary for a refill).

A tour of the facility produced several concerns as well, the first being the urgent care (UCC) area was closed off and not in use. Throughout the facility there is no automatic access for the handicapped. The women's clinic exam table was situated to expose whoever was being examined. Suggestion as to how to lessen the possible exposure was discussed and all agreed, table turned away from door.

The clinic lacks a podiatrist but is hiring a primary care floater (pending a background check); also has FTE position to conduct laser exams, but no authorization. There are three dentists that see about 140 veterans a month, according to a staff dentist.

The American Legion's Director for Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division, Louis Celli, was able to use the telehealth system to see what the veterans see when using the system to communicate remotely with physicians.

The Legion recommended that VA open the UCC, the Public Affairs Officer should request advocates for clinic, the Regional Office should assign personnel from the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) program, and non-paid and work study programs should be available to assist veterans as they enter and maneuver throughout the clinic.

Meeting with Congressman Pedro Pierluisi

On Thursday, April 9, 2015, Congressman Pierluisi (PR) met with Legion staff to discuss challenges that the Ponce Clinic faces and social issues for Puerto Rico as a whole that affect veterans. "Puerto Rican veterans feel that they are taken for granted," Pierluisi said. "Puerto Rico does not pay income taxes, but rather payroll taxes, and Puerto Rico is socially conservative." These were a few of the comments the congressman spoke of initially, as well the voting issues among veterans, and Puerto Rico as a territory and not a state. He went on to discuss the issues with census, as not all count as veterans depending on their time served; and how to get an accurate count of veterans in Puerto Rico. The conversation turned to the Ponce Clinic and how few women services were offered, the need for more physicians, the lack of urgent care services and that some veterans are forced to drive to the San Juan VAMC for care. However, Ponce Clinic does have a patient advocate on site.

VA Euripides Rubio Clinic-Ponce Outpatient Clinic

The Ponce Clinic is a Satellite of the San Juan VAMC, and was established in 1988 to improve access to Primary Care services for veterans in the southern part of Puerto Rico. The Clinic currently provide a wide variety of services:

- Primary Medical and Nursing Care
- General Psychiatry (not including drug and alcoholism services)
- Urology
- Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, including Occupational and Physical Therapy
- Cardiology, including Echocardiography, Stress Test and Holter
- Minor surgery
- Optometry and Clinical (non-surgical) Ophthalmology
- Podiatry
- Laboratory
- X-Ray and Sonography
- Pharmacy



- X-Ray and Sonography
- Social Work
- Dietetics Evaluation and Counseling
- Prescriptions: Prescriptions processed in our main facility, through the mail or My HealtheVet.

The Clinic also provides services with visiting staff in Gastroenterology and Spinal Cord Injury, and through “telemedicine” in several other specialties. Services that are not available in the Satellite Clinic can be obtained at the VA Medical Center in San Juan.

Once joining up with the clinic staff, the Legion learned that the Ponce Clinic provides a bus, by reservation, to assist veterans with appointments in San Juan. Patient’s identification allows them to be seen earlier and not miss a return ride back to Ponce. Ponce Clinic walk-ins are seen within 30 minutes of arriving. The clinic is open on Saturdays and has extended hours on Thursdays. The clinic routinely sees 700-800 patients daily; on a much heavier note, San Juan VAMC has about 800 deaths in the system, and sees about 200,000 veterans annually. The geriatrics program is being upgraded for more complex problems; the clinic has a very good OIF/OEF program. There was 3.2% overall change in out-patient visits from fiscal 2013-fiscal 2014, 15.2 percent for unique women veteran and 3.3 percent for unique patients. The current veteran population is 98,734, with a projected enrollment of 73,510; however by 2026 both of these areas will suffer a 37 percent decrease.

The staff spoke of MyHealtheVet and the increase in secured messages, which also provides secured documentation. The program is offered to all new patients and has a champion, but the drawback is the program only has one person teaching My HealtheVet.

Transportation payments are being held up due to system permission (only one person) in putting information into the system; this may cause a two-week delay in receiving payment.

Tour of the clinic proved pharmacy average wait times to be seven minutes; as noted in Mayaguez, there are no automatic doors for the handicapped, no homeless outreach program and no vocational rehabilitation counselor on site.

The women’s clinic holds v-tele on a monthly basis with San Juan VAMC. The clinic only has one exam room, but the table is positioned correctly. Veterans are only seen on Wednesday at a rate of about 20 per month. No minor procedure or mammograms performed on site.

Similar to the Mayaguez Clinic, The American Legion urged the Ponce Clinic to open UCC to service more veterans.