

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

March 4, 2022

The Honorable Gene L. Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Veterans living in medically underserved areas, such as those that lack health care providers, may face unique challenges accessing health care at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities.¹ Provider shortages and the need to travel long distances to receive care can lead to longer wait times and potentially worse health outcomes for veterans if needed care is delayed. When VA cannot provide health care services to veterans, such as when specialty services are not available, the agency generally provides care through community providers in its Community Care Program.

United States territories and rural communities may be particularly affected by provider shortages due to geographic barriers and difficulties in recruiting and hiring specialty providers to live in these areas. For example, according to VA, the VA Caribbean Healthcare System (VACHS) had no radiation oncologists for approximately three years prior to 2021. During this time, VACHS reported that veterans received care through VA's Community Care Program, resulting in some veterans flying to Florida to receive treatments, which can be burdensome and costly.

VA facilities in medically underserved areas may require a higher level of support and resources and should be identified and supported by VA. The VA MISSION Act of 2018 required VA to develop criteria to designate medical centers, ambulatory care facilities, and community-based outpatient clinics as "underserved facilities," and to submit a plan to Congress to address problems associated with VA's underserved facilities.²

Public health emergencies such as Hurricane Maria and the COVID-19 pandemic have only worsened provider shortages, highlighting the importance of identifying and addressing the needs of VA's underserved facilities and areas to help ensure our nation's veterans receive timely access to quality health care. We therefore request that GAO conduct a study reviewing VA's efforts to identify and address the needs of facilities in medically underserved areas and those that are designated as underserved by VA, focusing on the following areas:

- What criteria does VA use to determine whether its facilities are designated as underserved, and to what extent is the availability of specialty services included within this criteria? How does VA use such designations in its Community Care Program?

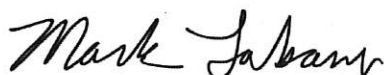
¹The Department of Health and Human Services' Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) defines a medically underserved area as an area designated by HRSA as having too few primary care providers, a high infant mortality, high poverty, or a high elderly population.

²Pub. L. No. 115-182, tit. IV, § 401, 132 Stat. 1393, 1470-71 (2018).

- What data exists and what do such data indicate on enrolled veterans' demand for VA care and the supply available at designated underserved facilities or facilities located in medically underserved areas?
- What steps, if any, has VA taken to improve physician hiring/recruitment and retention at designated underserved facilities or facilities located in medically underserved areas?
- What challenges, if any, do designated underserved facilities or facilities located in medically underserved areas face in making appropriate timely referrals to VA Community Care Program providers, and what actions has VA taken to address such challenges?
- What level of analysis is conducted by VISN Directors when determining whether facilities within their Networks qualify as underserved facilities and to what extent do they execute the details of their annual plans developed as a requirement of the VA MISSION Act of 2018?

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have any questions, please contact Elizabeth Mackenzie and Alexis MacDonald of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs majority staff (Elizabeth.Mackenzie@mail.house.gov and Alexis.MacDonald@mail.house.gov); Christine Hill and Samantha Gonzalez of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs minority staff (Christine.Hill@mail.house.gov and Samantha.Gonzalez@mail.house.gov); Katie Paulson, Legislative Assistant for Rep. Deborah Ross (Katie.Paulson@mail.house.gov); and Blake Hite, Legislative Aide for Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón (Blake.Hite@mail.house.gov).

Sincerely,



Mark Takano
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House of Representatives



Mike Bost
Ranking Member
Committee on Veterans' Affairs
House of Representatives



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