

Statement of Senator Jeff Flake
“Access to Justice for Those Who Serve”
Senator Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Oversight, Federal Rights, and Agency Action
March 27, 2014

While I am pleased the Senate is focusing on our veterans today, I am disappointed more attention is not being paid to the failures of the Veterans Administration to provide veterans their medical services and benefits. Congress has a responsibility to address this problem since the administration is apparently failing to do so.

For example, a recent CNN investigation revealed dozens of veterans with medical conditions are suffering at the hands of the VA, while thousands more wait months to receive basic medical care. Sadly, reports indicate that more than 20 veterans have died or are dying of cancer “because they had to wait too long for diagnosis or treatment” at a VA facility in South Carolina. In the Texas region, seven vets or their families were sent disclosures about adverse events and serious injuries suffered because of delayed care. These are just a few examples of veterans nationwide who have suffered due to the failures of VA hospitals.

Here is another startling statistic. In 2013, only 41 percent of new primary care appointments for our veterans were completed within 14 days of when the appointment was scheduled. In other words, 60 percent of all new appointments require veterans to wait more than two weeks to see the doctor. It is troubling to think that veterans are waiting more than fourteen days to receive an initial doctor’s appointment.

The Veterans Administration’s processing of veterans’ disability benefit claims is troubling as well. According to a recent study, it takes an average of 376 days for the VA to process veterans’ disability benefit claims. In Cleveland, Ohio, it takes an average of 464 days for the VA to process veterans’ disability benefit claims. Approximately 34,000 veterans have

been waiting for a year or longer on requests for disability compensation. A March 2014 analysis of the VA claims backlog found approximately 400,000 veterans are still waiting for their claims to be processed. This administration has seemingly done little to combat this problem.

I believe that Congress has an obligation and duty to provide veterans with adequate healthcare and benefits. Unfortunately, too many veterans have to wait too long to receive their benefits. Towards a solution, I cosponsored an amendment to the Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act, which would have compelled the VA to process the backlog of claims. Although the amendment was not adopted, I believe Congress should first focus on efforts like mine to eliminate this backlog and ensure the federal government is providing veterans with the benefits they were promised and certainly deserve.