



**THE SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS  
WASHINGTON**

March 24, 2017

The Honorable Joni K. Ernst  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Ernst:

Thank you for your February 17, 2017, letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding your concerns about our medical scheduling software programs. VA shares your concerns; and we want to ensure that these programs do not duplicate efforts or waste taxpayer dollars. We assure you that while future scheduling tools are being developed, the current legacy Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture (VistA) scheduling system will be in place to manage Veteran care and will be enhanced while VA works on more definitive solutions.

As you are aware, VA is moving forward to improve scheduling with four related projects. The four scheduling projects are complementary in nature and address a variety of issues identified by Veterans and the Veterans Health Administration. Continuing these projects will provide short-term improvements for schedulers and Veterans, ensure resources are available for appointments, allow Veterans to schedule their own appointments, and facilitate scheduling care outside of VA.

First, VA is rolling out VistA Scheduling Enhancement (VSE) as a low-cost, improvement to provide immediate relief to VA schedulers. VSE is a solution that will provide immediate help to the field; but is only a temporary measure until the Medical Appointment Scheduling System (MASS) can be fully implemented. The VSE program provides a more user-friendly interface, making it easier for VA scheduling staff to view available appointment times, thereby reducing scheduling errors. For the first time, VSE incorporates Veteran preferences for appointment times within the application itself, and it also identifies Veterans' special appointing needs. Further, VSE consolidates all appointment requests in one place for schedulers to address. VSE has received favorable feedback from its users thus far. For example, a new scheduling user at one of the five test sites said: "I was given a big list of patients to reschedule and just wanted you to know how much easier it is with this new system! Click and drag is much more fun than all those keystrokes." VA will implement VSE nationally over the next several months as safely and quickly as possible.

Secondly, VA is piloting a long-term, comprehensive industry-standard, resource-based scheduling system called MASS. MASS is expected to improve access and productivity in part by ensuring all the resources (e.g., exam room, support staff, equipment, etc.) required to successfully complete an appointment are available. After installation of MASS at the Boise, Idaho VAMC pilot location, VA will evaluate the

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experience, including measurement of key performance indicators such as patient access and provider productivity, to determine the best value for Veterans. Through this pilot, VA will better understand the ability of MASS to integrate with the existing VistA scheduling application and/or a future VA digital health platform. If successful, MASS would totally replace VistA with an industry-standard, resource-based scheduling tool.

The Faster Care for Veterans Act of 2016 ("the Act," Public Law 114-286) requires VA to begin a pilot program under which Veterans use an internet website or mobile application to schedule and confirm medical appointments at VA medical facilities. The pilot program must be implemented in not less than three Veterans Integrated Service Networks. Through the pilot program, VA must seek to enter into a contract using competitive procedures with one or more contractors to provide the scheduling capability required by the law. This acquisition effort is underway with an anticipated award prior to April 15, 2017, the date required for such action by the Act and the date on which VA must officially initiate the pilot program. While VA pursues the commercial solution, VA's Mobile Veterans Appointment Request (VAR) application provides most of the key capabilities required by the Act and is modeled after successful mobile and Web applications used for patient scheduling outside of VA. The VAR application is currently available for Veteran use at 57 medical centers, with further national implementation efforts ongoing. VA intends to continue implementation and development of VAR, particularly as it is available for use immediately, which is important given the urgency of providing Veterans with self-scheduling options. VA will evaluate the VAR application in parallel with the commercial product once both have been implemented, with the goal of determining the best solution for the Veteran's use.

These four efforts support VA's ultimate goal to implement a comprehensive state-of-the-art scheduling solution for both patients and schedulers. VA's strategy has both short and medium-term components. Improving the legacy VistA scheduling applications now allows for immediate improvements, while VA simultaneously invests in a long-term best-of-breed scheduling solution.

Should you have further questions, please have a member of your staff contact Mr. Saki Ververis, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 461-7216 or by email at [Saki.Ververis@va.gov](mailto:Saki.Ververis@va.gov). Thank you for your continued support of our mission.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David J. Shulkin", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

David J. Shulkin, M.D.