

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

February 28, 2018

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR
MARGARET E. DAUM, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

The Honorable David J. Shulkin
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to request information about how the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is using the Technology-Based Eye Care Services (TECS) program to provide eye exams for veterans. While the program aims to expand services for veterans, particularly those in rural areas, concerns have also been raised about whether TECS provides a sufficient level of care.¹

According to VA, veterans are at a higher risk of eye disease, including cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, and diabetes-related conditions, than the average person.² The TECS program provides eye screenings to veterans using a technique called auto-refraction to monitor for vision problems; these screenings are then supposed to be reviewed by ophthalmologists for diagnosis and treatment. VA began the TECS program in 2015 and has since expanded the program to other VA clinics across the country, including at some local VA outpatient clinics.³ I understand that the Community-Based Outpatient Clinic in St. Joseph, Missouri, is in the processing of implementing the TECS program.⁴

While the increase in access to services for rural veterans is critically important, the American Optometric Association has raised concerns about the TECS program. These concerns include the experimental nature of the screening process, the qualifications of the persons reviewing the screenings, and whether this technique is comparable to an in-person, comprehensive dilated eye examination. According to the American Optometric Association,

¹ *VA Criticized over Eye Care for Vets in Rural Areas*, Stars and Stripes (Jan. 31, 2018) (www.stripes.com/news/va-criticized-over-eye-care-for-vets-in-rural-areas-1.509428).

² Department of Veterans Affairs, *Focus on Veterans' Vision: A Glance at Innovative Vision Research Underway in Atlanta* (Jan. 13, 2017) (www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/34412/focus-veterans-vision-glance-innovative-vision-research-underway-atlanta-vamc/).

³ *VA Criticized over Eye Care for Vets in Rural Areas*, Stars and Stripes (Jan. 31, 2018) (www.stripes.com/news/va-criticized-over-eye-care-for-vets-in-rural-areas-1.509428).

⁴ Email from Bailey Jackson, Department of Veterans Affairs, to Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Minority Staff (Feb. 8, 2018).

“veterans being offered these TECS screenings may receive substandard diagnoses and care, and may mistakenly assume that they have received a comprehensive eye examination.”⁵

In order to better understand the use and efficacy of the TECS program and how it impacts rural veterans and the care they receive, I request that you provide written responses to the following questions and a briefing to my staff on this topic no later than March 21, 2018:

1. Please provide a list of all VA clinics that are currently using, or in the process of implementing, the TECS program.
2. How many veterans have received screenings through the TECS program since 2015? How many veterans does VA anticipate serving at the outpatient clinic in St. Joseph, Missouri?
3. What are the goals of the TECS program and what metrics are in place to measure whether those goals have been achieved? What metric(s), if any, does VA use to determine success in serving more rural veterans?
4. What policies does the VA have in place regarding the qualifications and training of technicians and those permitted to view or review the screening results?
5. What quality control measures are in place to ensure that veterans are being properly diagnosed and provided the correct prescription or treatment?
6. What policies and protocols are in place to ensure there is appropriate follow-up care if a more serious condition is detected?
7. Has VA evaluated whether TECS serves more veterans, or provides a higher level of service, than other eye care options through Veterans Choice?

If you have any questions, please contact Hannah Berner with my Committee staff at (202) 224-5065 or Hannah_Berner@hsgac.senate.gov. Please send any official correspondence related to this request to Lucy Balcezak at Lucy_Balcezak@hsgac.senate.gov. Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter.

⁵ American Optometric Association, *Update: Senate VA Chairman Deals Blow to TECS Program* (Feb. 13, 2017) (www.aoa.org/news/advocacy/update-senate-va-chairman-deals-blow-to-tecs-program).

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Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Claire McCaskill". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Claire" starting with a large loop and the last name "McCaskill" following in a similar style.

Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member

cc: Ron Johnson
Chairman