

RON WYDEN
OREGON

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FINANCE

221 DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20510
(202) 224-5244

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-3703

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May 17, 2024

Dr. Teresa Boyd
VA Northwest Health Network Office
1601 E. 4th Plain Blvd Building 17, Suite 403
Vancouver, WA 98661

Dear Dr. Boyd:

I write to you regarding the Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General (VA OIG)'s report entitled "Comprehensive Healthcare Inspection of the Roseburg VA Health Care System in Oregon" released May 15, 2024.

This report highlights the improvements that must be made within the Roseburg VA Health Care System to ensure the highest quality of care to Oregon's veterans. This analysis by VA OIG indicates two serious and systemic issues affecting care: low staffing levels and issues with the Oracle Cerner electronic health record system.

First, I recognize the acute challenges in improving staffing levels after the COVID-19 pandemic, but I remain concerned that Roseburg is operating at 48% of its authorized strength during VA OIG's inspection, and even lower in some of Oregon's rural areas. This is unacceptable for the veterans counting on the local and quality care they earned with their service, especially considering the new tools Congress has provided the VA to address this problem. For example, with my support, Congress passed into law the Sergeant First Class Health Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxic (PACT) Act, which provides greater incentives the VA may utilize to retain employees with in-demand skills, or skills that are in short supply and serve a critical need. These include recruitment and relocation bonuses, retention bonuses, merit awards, and bumps in salaries, including up to 25% of the basic pay of the employees, as well as waivers on certain payments. In addition to these benefits, I worked with my congressional colleagues to secure authorities for the VA to expedite the hiring of college graduates and post-secondary students, which allow the VA to fill vacancies quickly. I would like to receive an update from you on how the VA intends to improve staffing levels and how the VA is utilizing these additional authorities to address unfilled staffing positions at Roseburg and throughout Oregon.

Second, since 2022, I have joined my congressional colleagues in sounding the alarm about the Oracle Cerner electronic health record modernization effort. While modernization is an important and necessary step, I continue to track reports of widespread challenges stemming

911 NE 11TH AVENUE
SUITE 630
PORTLAND, OR 97232
(503) 326-7525

405 EAST 8TH AVE
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(541) 431-0229

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105 FIR ST
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LA GRANDE, OR 97850
(541) 962-7691

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SUITE 107
BEND, OR 97701
(541) 330-9142

707 13TH ST, SE
SUITE 285
SALEM, OR 97301
(503) 589-4555

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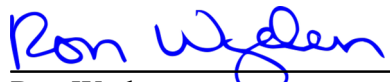
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from this new system, including challenges surrounding patient safety, staff burnout, budgeting, workflows, professional evaluations, and suicide prevention. I am glad the VA decided in April 2023 to halt additional deployments of this system. The VA OIG's report continues to underscore the issues that Oracle Cerner must address with the VA before the modernization efforts resume in other locations.

The VA OIG report also addresses another serious matter, which is suicide prevention measures. I am alarmed that the OIG estimates staff failed to complete an evaluation for 57% of patients who had a positive suicide risk screen, which is significantly above the OIG's 10% deficiency benchmark. The OIG report goes on to document that staff did not notify the suicide prevention team about two patients who reported suicidal behaviors during the evaluation. Concerningly, VA OIG observed that the Roseburg VA Health Care System failed to conduct its required five suicide prevention outreach activities each month. I recognize that VA leadership attributes these findings to inadequate training and staffing as the reason for Roseburg's inability to satisfy the stated requirements for reporting and outreach, but these outcomes are unacceptable and ultimately reaffirms the importance of addressing staffing shortages at Roseburg.

The VA OIG report confirms the very concerns that Oregon veterans and their supporters have told me about and been expressing for years in the community. I appreciate your willingness to tackle these issues head on and for accepting the VA OIG's recommendations to address these outstanding problems. I ask that you keep me apprised of your efforts to do so and thank you for your continued leadership.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator

CC: Patrick Hull, Executive Director, Roseburg VA Health Care System