

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-0908

August 18, 2023

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

We write with regard to the lack of permanent solutions to infrastructure, and quality of care, issues at U.S. Department of Veterans (VA) health facilities in Florida. In addition to dozens of outpatient clinics and veteran centers, the VA operates seven medical centers in Florida, serving the state's nearly 1.5 million veterans. Specifically, we are alarmed at the lack of adequate air conditioning (AC) at the Miami VA Healthcare System (Miami VA), among other concerns. If no action is taken for lasting solutions, these issues are likely to be compounded as Florida's veterans population continues to grow.

Last week, the Miami VA stopped all elective surgeries due to AC maintenance. Not only does this interrupt veterans' care, but it presents an unsafe working environment for the medical staff at the facility, including nurses reporting mold. Miami VA has been using portable AC units, and veterans and hospital employees continue to complain about the uncomfortable heat inside the building.¹ Unfortunately, this is not a one-off event as similar issues have previously occurred that led to the relocation of veteran patients due to dangerous heat. It is being reported that it will take three months to re-open the closed floors in the hospital, causing prolonged disruption to care for veterans.²

The issues at the Miami VA speak to larger concerns we have about Florida's VA medical facilities and the quality of care provided by the VA across the state. At the end of July, we were alarmed to see that two of the seven VA medical centers in the state – the Bay Pines and West Palm Beach VA medical centers received a one-star rating in the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) annual Overall Quality Star Ratings. This is the first time VA hospitals have been included in the yearly assessment, which considers mortality rates, patient safety, hospital readmissions, patient experience, and timely and effective care.³ This score is disheartening to veterans, caregivers, and families who put their trust in the VA health care system, and the VA must do better to increase the quality of care provided at these facilities.

¹ <https://www.nbcmiami.com/on-air/as-seen-on/air-condition-problems-continue-at-miami-va-healthcare-system/3090630/>

² <https://www.local10.com/news/local/2023/08/10/miami-va-medical-center-experiencing-more-ac-issues-as-temperatures-soar/>

³ <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/07/27/va-hospitals-rate-higher-civilian-facilities-new-federal-survey.html>

We trust the VA is actively working to amend the issues that affect nearly 230,000 veterans between the three facilities. Specifically, we expect a swift and lasting solution to the AC issues at the Miami VA to ensure that this does not continue to impede the delivery of care to Florida's veterans. As such, we request answers to the following questions:

1. What is the timeline to fix the AC unit at the Miami VA?
2. Why was a permanent and lasting solution to the AC issue at the Miami VA not established after previous issues?
3. What steps is the VA taking to ensure that such an outage is avoided going forward?
4. How many veteran patients does this outage impact, and how is the VA communicating to all impacted veterans and staff on the issue and their plans to fix the system?
 - a. Please include any data relating to the number of veterans being referred to outside the VA for care.
5. Has the VA implemented plans to increase the quality of care, and other issues raised, at the Bay Pines and West Palm Beach VA facilities?
6. What steps is the VA taking to provide veterans, caregivers, and families with the confidence that Bay Pines and West Pam Beach VA facilities are capable and dependable facilities following the CMS ratings release?
7. Does the VA need additional authorities in order to carry out any of the above solutions?

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



Marco Rubio
U.S. Senator



Rick Scott
U.S. Senator