

Medical appointments for vets slow to improve

By Jeff Barnard
Associated Press

GRANTS PASS (AP) — Wait times for Oregon veterans seeking medical care have been slow to improve as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs struggles to hire doctors and nurses.

Frustrations competing with the private sector to fill vacancies for staff in specialties and primary care in the Portland area have been compounded by the city's status as one of the fastest-growing VA medical service areas in the nation, said VA spokesman Daniel E. Herrigstad.

Despite no active-duty military bases in the area, Portland is seeing a 7.3 percent increase annually in new patients, compared to 2 percent nationwide, Herrigstad said.

"It's just one of those things," he said. "We have a lot of folks moving out to this part of the country, many are veterans, and many are signing up" for medical care.

The Portland service area has been trying to fill about 20 primary care positions, including doctors, nurses and other staff, Herrigstad said. In January, as part of the effort to improve patient care, the Portland area was authorized

nearly \$34 million for 174 additional staffers, which they aim to fill over the next two years.

The Associated Press examined waiting times for appointments at 15 VA medical facilities in Oregon as part of a nationwide look at how the agency has been doing since a scandal over delays and attempts to cover them up led to the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and prompted Congress last August to pass the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act.

It is difficult to quantify exactly how things have changed. The VA introduced a new method for measuring wait times at the end of the summer, making it impossible to compare published wait times now with the data VA was releasing last spring.

But government data from Sept. 1 through Feb. 28 is clear: Wait times at four medical facilities in the Portland area that account for about half the veterans appointments statewide have not improved consistently, and in some cases have gotten a little worse.

At the worst of them, an outpatient clinic in Salem, 5.5 percent of the 20,000 appointments completed exceeded the

VA's goal of waiting no more than 30 days to get care. That's roughly double the nationwide average of 2.8 percent — enough to rank the clinic among the nation's worst performers when it comes to delayed care.

The best of the four, the Portland VA Medical Center, missed the goal 3.6 percent of the time on nearly 162,000 appointments. An outpatient clinic in West Linn was 4.1 percent and an outpatient clinic in Portland was 4.2 percent.

Second-worst overall was an outpatient clinic in North Bend, with 4.7 percent. The best statewide was the La Grande outpatient clinic, which reported that only two of the nearly 4,100 appointments completed took longer than 30 days to complete.

Former Marine Corps truck driver Greg Helstrom of Lebanon has been having trouble scheduling an MRI to see what is wrong with his shoulder.

"Waiting for specialty stuff takes a long time, but as far as your normal checkups and stuff like that, it all goes good," he said.

That feeling is echoed by Frank Blair of Springfield, an Army infantry vet who

served two tours in Vietnam and now helps vets navigate the medical bureaucracy as an accredited service officer for the American Legion and Vietnam Veterans of America.

"It's specialty clinics everybody is having problems with," he said. "You can build a lot of facilities, but can you staff them?"

New facilities were coming on line even before the scandal.

The Salem clinic opened last year. A new clinic in Eugene is scheduled to open next year. And the Roseburg VA Medical Center has a new residential care facility for dementia patients.

But hiring personnel remains a problem. In the Portland area, the 174 positions the VA is trying to fill includes 29 physicians, 50 nurses, and 58 support personnel, Herrigstad said.

Roseburg is recruiting 44 new people, and is starting a system to offer patients video consultations with medical staff in Boise, Idaho, but it's having trouble finding staffers who want to live in a rural area, spokeswoman Debbie Mican said.

AP writer Sheila V Kumar contributed to this report from Salem.

Powell Butte man charged in estranged wife's shooting

PRINEVILLE (AP) — Sheriff's deputies arrested a Powell Butte man accused of shooting his estranged wife during a domestic dispute.

Crook County Undersheriff John Gautney says 41-year-old John Knox Heere was arrested Thursday morning and charged with attempted murder and other crimes.

Gautney told KTVZ that Heere fired a shot that went through a car windshield and hit Annette Harless in the upper arm. Harless was taken to the hospital by a private party.

The husband was lodged at the Crook County jail on \$120,000 bail.

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