

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives

March 17, 2021

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PEND OREILLE  
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STEVENS  
WALLA WALLA  
WHITMAN

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

Dear Secretary McDonough:

As you decide how to proceed with the Cerner electronic health record (EHR), I hope you will keep the real-life experiences of veterans and VA employees in Eastern Washington top of mind. The system is not an improvement, at least not yet. It has put new stress on the Mann-Grandstaff VA Medical Center, which is a vital lifeline for so many of our veterans and has struggled with staffing and morale for several years.

I am hearing an increasing number of complaints and pleas for help coming into my Spokane and Colville offices. They typically concern the same issues: prescriptions, the new patient portal, and training. I am getting reports of veterans not receiving their prescriptions when needed or receiving the wrong prescriptions. This seems to be especially troublesome when information from veterans' health records gets mixed up with the Cerner EHR at Fairchild Air Force Base. I have one report of a VA doctor ordering a veteran two medications, but he received 15 erroneous medications. I have multiple reports of prescriptions being delayed, which in one case caused a veteran to suffer withdrawal. These impacts are dangerous and unacceptable.

These problems seemed to be caused by VA staff struggling with ordering medications in the system as well as veterans and their families being confused by the Cerner patient portal. This patient portal is not only unfamiliar but less functional than the old VA patient portal. On top of that, it reportedly only runs on Microsoft browsers. I understand the desire to use Cerner's patient portal alongside its EHR, but abruptly disabling the VA My HealthVet patient portal was not helpful.

Mann-Grandstaff employees were motivated to adopt the Cerner EHR first on behalf of the VA health system even through the added stress of the pandemic, but I am hearing from some who are deeply frustrated with the system and are not getting the support they need. Nurses who go to work every day to serve our veterans should not be driven to tears because software, which was intended to be an improvement, makes their jobs more difficult. Staffing in primary care has long been a challenge, but it is my understanding that turnover in primary care nursing reached 60 percent last year. While the staffing surge in early 2020 to prepare for the EHR was a positive development, it now seems those staffing gains have all but evaporated.

As the new Secretary, I know you are inheriting this program and evaluating how to accomplish VA objectives. I hope you will always prioritize the interests of the veterans who go to Mann-Grandstaff and other medical centers for their care. I respectfully request that you look into the issues I have described and answer the following questions:

1. How does the VA assess the current staffing situation at Mann-Grandstaff in primary and specialty care, and what are your recruitment goals this year?
2. What is the productivity level now at Mann-Grandstaff compared to before the Cerner EHR was installed in October 2020?
3. What steps are being taken to protect staff morale and retention while the disruption from the EHR implementation is being addressed?
4. What training resources are currently available at Mann-Grandstaff from the VA and Cerner?
5. What infrastructure improvements are still ongoing at Mann-Grandstaff?
6. What plans are in place to ensure access to the ICU, psychiatric services, dental care, and to reach 24-hour urgent care capability?

Thank you for your attention to this urgent situation and for your commitment to our nation's veterans. Please contact Matthew Cardenas at [matthew.cardenas@mail.house.gov](mailto:matthew.cardenas@mail.house.gov) in my office with any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Cathy McMorris Rodgers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Cathy" being the most prominent.

Congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers