

# VA Healthcare Vastly Improved in Last Ten Years...

## Veterans Trust Level Also Rising

By H. James Hulton III, Vietnam Era Veteran

For many years leading up to 2007, the overall quality of healthcare delivered to Veterans from all wartime eras since Vietnam was significantly low. Veterans had excessive long wait times, in some instances, months, to receive any kind of healthcare at the VA. And, while these Veterans waited and waited, many of them died unnecessarily as patients in, for example, the Phoenix, AZ and Philadelphia, PA VAs. During this time, high-ranking VA officials were not held accountable for their actions and low leadership quality. This became a monumental problem nationwide for the VA until things began to slowly change from the top down since 2007. Over this period, the VA has changed many of its programs, including partnering with the private health sector, to achieve some successful results. Today, the VA effectively serves over 9 million Veterans nationwide!



Shreveport, LA VA Medical Center

An independent survey conducted in 2019 showed high **satisfaction** rates among **veterans** with their **VA** health services, with 82% reporting they were at

least "somewhat" **satisfied** with care. For **veterans** who have access to the **VA** and Tricare, 52% said they prefer Tricare, while 43% said they preferred general **VA** healthcare.

Nearly three-quarters, 74%, reported seeing improvements at their local **VA**. Wait times are shorter and expanded community care options are available, resulting in **improved** health care outcomes.

The level of trust veterans have in the medical care they receive at the Department of Veterans Affairs has rapidly risen during the **COVID-19 Pandemic**, averaging nearly 90% for the first time since the Department began soliciting feedback in late 2017. For Jim Hulton, a Vietnam Era USAF officer Veteran, the care he received at the Coatesville, PA VA for his two **COVID 19 Moderna** vaccine shots was exceptional. He was called in promptly and quickly at the start of the Department vaccination process by the Coatesville VA. He received outstanding service and observed that all other Veterans he saw there also got outstanding service. "The service I received could not have been any better," he noted.

In outpatient surveys taken following appointments for health services, veterans' trust in care increased 5% during the past three years, from an 84.9% satisfaction rate in the fourth quarter of 2017 to 89% through the end of March 2019.

The figures were based on more than four million responses from veterans, according to the VA. Of those millions of veterans who have responded since 2017, 3.5 million said they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that they trusted their health care.

In a month-by-month breakdown of VA patient trust during the Pandemic, the trust metric exceeded 90%: As of April 11, 2021, 90.1% of veterans who responded, gave high marks for trust, according to the VA.

The VA reports, since 2018, more than two-thirds of survey comments from veterans regarding their health care have been positive, only 19% have been negative. Roughly 7% said they were dissatisfied, and 11% were neutral on their experience.

Results are based on the VA's Veterans Signals patient feedback program. VA officials said they have worked hard to improve the customer experience at VA hospitals and clinics, creating a new training program for employees and adding personnel to facilities who are available for customer assistance at help desks and in hallways. One of the biggest errors the VA was committing was not returning phone calls from Veterans leaving voice mail messages. This has been improved

upon in recent times, particularly when phones and computers now have the ability to set up and use Zoom calls for meetings between medical officials and Veterans.

Among veterans who have access only to the VA or Medicare/Medicaid, 67% said they prefer VA care over Medicare. Female veterans were less likely to say they used VA health care than male vets, at 70% versus 82%.

**In the past 8 ½ years, Hulton has had the following procedures performed by the VA: triple by-pass open heart surgery, a stent insertion, prostate cancer radiation therapy, hip replacement surgery, skin treatments for cancer, and most recently, a second cardiac catherization process at the Philadelphia VA.** He notes, “Ever since my open-heart surgery over 8 ½ years ago and other subsequent procedures, I cannot be treated any better by all my VA healthcare officials in the Coatesville, PA VA, Philadelphia, PA VA, and Wilmington, DE VA.”

Philadelphia VA and University of Pennsylvania cardiologist Dr. Kevin Duffy, Hulton’s assigned specialist physician, indicated that some members of the skilled surgical team that worked on Hulton consisted of Dr. Robert Wilensky (Attending Physician), Dr. Rim Halaby (Cardiology Fellow), David Brown (Nurse), Laura Connors (Nurse), and Karen McCoy, Technician. He noted that “the procedure went better than expected and the results were successful.”

In the local Philadelphia VA region since 2007, Dr. Duffy noted that “one of the several things that have changed is the size of the Philadelphia VA staff; it has almost tripled in this time. There are many more physicians, nurses, and technicians to handle the steady increase in Veteran patients that are being seen at the current time. Some Veteran patients are even having to drive three and four hours to get to the Philadelphia VA,” he noted.

Other major changes include the technology offerings such as Veterans taking advantage of **Telehealth** services and Zoom visits to participate in managing some of their own healthcare. There is new hi-tech equipment in the catherization lab such as the eco-cardiogram machines which are able to give Veterans the best medical care available throughout the medical industry.

Many of the physicians at the Philadelphia VA also have faculty appointments at the **University of Pennsylvania** just two or three blocks away from the Philly VA. This program has been going on for approximately 25 years for both full-time physicians and student interns. Many of the VA medical centers across the VA

system have partnered with universities to obtain the services of well-trained and educated medical staff to serve the nation's Veterans.

Some other factors that influence the level of healthcare provided Veterans is the VA medical center leadership. Top VA leadership is supportive of staff to engage in improving healthcare for all types of Veteran healthcare needs. Of course, over this time, medication and medical operating procedures have also vastly improved.

Throughout the VA, there is a program known as “**HRO,**” **Highly Reliable Organization.** The intent here is to produce **ZERO harm** to Veteran patients, to provide constant evaluation while making as few mistakes as possible. “Healthcare is a journey, not a destination, in order to keep healthcare on a higher level,” noted Dr. Duffy.

In recent times there also has been a conceptual culture shift that has become a VA national mandate. There are three pillars of excellence included in this mandate:

- Leadership – supports staff through all its communications.
- Culture of Safety – everyone feels comfortable to speak up if something is not safe for Veteran patients.
- Continuous Improvement – seeks ways to improve, reassess, making it a constant process.

When asked how he participates in the HRO process, Dr. Duffy indicated that he asks himself “What can I do to improve safety, quality, and efficiency to serve Veterans? Because if one factor improves, others also improve. They overlap.”



**Philadelphia, PA VA Medical Center**



**Coatesville, PA VA Medical Center**



**Wilmington, DE VA Medical Center**

Hulton notes, “I have received excellent care by everyone, either by personal face to face office visits, zoom meetings during this Pandemic, phone calls, mail delivery of medications, postal mail correspondence, the online program **“MyHealthVet,”** or in-person surgical procedures.”

Has the VA resolved 100% of its challenges from the recent past? Perhaps not. But comparing their deplorable performance then to what it is today, there really is no comparison. Veterans are mostly pleased with the service they are getting and are more apt to recommend the VA to fellow Veterans as more and more of them depart from active duty today to return to civilian life.

**Note:** H. James Hulton III is a USAF Veteran from the Vietnam Era and currently is a freelance copywriter from North Wales, PA. He can be reached at [jameshultoniii@gmail.com](mailto:jameshultoniii@gmail.com) and <https://www.thewritestuffjh.com>

