

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 18, 2006

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Comptroller General Walker:

On January 31, 2002, the Under Secretary for Health of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) issued guidance (2002-006) under Executive Order 13166 to ensure our nation's veterans receive culturally and linguistically competent care. Under the directive, the VA medical facilities and vets centers were to:

- conduct a thorough assessment of the language needs of the population to be served, including identifying the non-English languages that are likely to be encountered;
- develop and implement a comprehensive language assistance program, which includes hiring bilingual staff and interpreters for patient and client contact positions, and translating written materials (such as consent forms, notice of free language assistance and outreach materials) in languages other than English;
- train staff on the limited English proficiency (LEP) access policy and on carrying it out; and
- establish vigilant monitoring and oversight to ensure that LEP persons have meaningful access to health care and services.

Despite the VA's commitment "to making its programs and services accessible to all," the VA has not, by its own assessment, implemented the guidance. In a letter dated March 21, 2006, the VA admitted that only 43 percent of VA facilities have trained their staff to understand the VA's policy and only 24 percent of facilities have translated materials into languages they encounter. Less than half of VA facilities have implemented a written policy in accordance with the VA's guidance and more than one-third of facilities have failed to provide monitoring and oversight. The VA's response did not address whether it has established vigilant monitoring and oversight to ensure that persons with LEP have meaningful access to health care and services.

Providing culturally and linguistically competent care for our veterans is especially important when the U.S. Armed Forces are increasing recruiting racial and ethnic minorities. One in ten U.S. Soldiers and one in seven Marines are Latino. Seven percent of the U.S. Navy is Asian and Pacific Islander American. This VA guidance is scheduled to expire on January 31, 2007 and we are concerned that without implementation of the guidance by the VA, our servicemen, women and their families may be lacking the care they need as they transition from military to civilian life.

Therefore, we request the GAO's assistance in reviewing the progress that has been made in implementing VA Guidance 2002-006 to meet the intent of Executive Order 13166. We also request GAO's recommendations for ways to improve access to quality, linguistically and culturally competent care in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Here are some important questions to help guide your evaluation and provide additional focus for our request and interests:

- 1.) Does the VA have the necessary tools to comply with VA 2002-006?
- 2.) VA 2002-06 is scheduled to expire January 31, 2007. Is there a commitment by the VA to meet the intent of the Executive Order 13166 beyond the expiration of the guidance?
- 3.) Has the VA, consistent with the guidance, established a task force to evaluate implementation and to prioritize needed actions to implement the four components of the LEP access plan?
- 4.) Has the VA developed or does the VA have a specific plan to ensure seamless transition of veterans and their families to receive benefits, including bilingual readjustment and bereavement counseling?
- 5.) Does the VA have a process to translate vital documents and other materials, including materials on the internet as part of its outreach efforts to servicemembers transitioning into civilian life and the post-deployment health reassessment program?
- 6.) Has the VA conducted outreach to veterans and their families in communities which may have higher proportions of LEP populations so as to ensure they are aware of eligibility for benefits and services?

Thank you for your cooperation with this request. Should you have any questions please have your staff contact Megan J. Uzzell in the office of Representative Solis at (202) 225-5464.

Sincerely,



HILDA L. SOLIS
Member of Congress



MICHAEL H. MICHAUD
Ranking Member
Health Subcommittee
House Veterans Affairs Committee



JOHN T. SALAZAR
Member of Congress