Veterans Health Administration
Access to Care Website: Six Essential Questions

1. What is changing?

VA is improving and expanding access information on the www.AccesstoCare.VA.gov website to better support Veterans as they plan their health care. The website will provide a more comprehensive representation of average wait times for Veteran health care services and an expanded list of specialty care services – such as mental health. Additional information on the Access to Care website changes can be found below.

Improved User Experience
VA has used Veteran feedback to update the Access to Care website, providing additional access information for Veterans to use as they plan their health care. Veterans will find a more user-friendly Access to Care site with information they have indicated matters to them beyond average wait times. VA has expanded available care types, included Veteran satisfaction and experience results, and streamlined the search process to require fewer prompts. These changes more closely align with the Veteran experience.

Updated Wait Time Methodology
VA has also changed the way wait times are calculated and displayed on the website. Average wait times for all Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical centers and clinics (except those that have transitioned to VA's new Electronic Health Record (EHR)) are now calculated to include additional steps in the appointment process that had not been captured in the past. Average wait times are representative of general performance within VA's system and are now more reflective of when care was requested and received. VA locations with fewer appointments may show average wait times that are skewed higher or lower than what Veterans experience.

Sites that have fully implemented VA's new EHR are using Third Next Available Appointment (TNAA) data to show wait times. TNAA is commonly used in the health care industry and considered a more accurate measure of elective service availability than the next available appointment or second-next available appointment.

Expanded Display of Mental Health Services
VA is also updating and expanding information for Mental Health services on the Access to Care website. By displaying average wait times for sub-categories of care, Veterans can see average break downs for treatment programs including Individual and Group Therapy, General Mental Health, Substance Use Disorder programs, Primary Care-Mental Health Integrated Care, and PTSD Specific Programs. Additional sub-specialties will be made available as VA expands the website's capabilities.

2. Why is it changing?

VA has published average wait times for primary care, mental health, and specialty care appointments at each of its medical centers since 2014, in accordance with federal law. Since that time, VA has received feedback from Veterans, caregivers, Veteran service organizations, oversight authorities, and Congress, which led the Department to revise the wait time metrics presented on the Access to Care website to better reflect the Veteran experience when seeking healthcare in the VHA system. As part of this process, VA conducted focus groups that included a diverse representation of Veterans in categories including age, era, race/ethnicity, utilization type (in-person/telehealth), gender and geographical segments.

While there is no perfect way to measure wait times in aggregate, VA is making changes that represent a meaningful improvement in how this information is presented to Veterans. In addition to updating the wait time calculations, website updates will also provide:

- Veteran experience data;
- increased granularity within certain subspecialties; and
- ability to more easily view relevant medical center information.

3. Why is it changing now?

VA is addressing the feedback received to make the Access to Care website easier to navigate and ensure the information provided is easier to understand and aligns with the actual Veteran experience when seeking care. On April 7, 2022, OIG provided a report recommending VA make changes to provide a transparent, consistent, and simple way to share wait time information with Veterans.

While there is no perfect way to measure wait times in aggregate, VA is making changes that represent a meaningful improvement in how the Department presents this information to Veterans. VA will continue to make improvements as updates are made to scheduling systems, technological capabilities, and related processes.

4. What is not changing?

VA will continue to provide an exceptional Veteran experience and deliver timely, high-quality care aligned to each Veteran's clinical needs.

Veterans eligible for community care will continue to have the choice about where to receive their care. VA does not use average wait times to determine community care eligibility. Wait time eligibility for community care is always based on the time it takes for an individual Veteran to obtain a specific type of care. Average wait times shared on www.AccesstoCare.VA.gov represent an average experience and are meant to be used as a guide to help Veterans consider their healthcare options.

5. What are the Veteran and organizational risks of not changing?

Veteran Risks	Organizational Risks
• Decisions made about Veterans' health care will continue to be based on information displayed on the website that does not align with their ultimate experience when seeking care	• Veteran and public trust in the VA may diminish if changes to the Access to Care website are not made and if those changes are not reflective of Veterans' true experience when seeking care

6. What are the Veteran and organizational benefits of the change?

Veteran Benefits	Organizational Benefits
• Provides a more complete picture of the current state of access at a VA facility and across the enterprise • Better aligns average wait time data on Access to Care site with actual Veteran and provider experience • Displays information in a way Veterans can more clearly understand • Provides greater transparency for access to specific, high-priority mental health services (such as PTSD treatment) and other high-priority specialties • Provides a more user-friendly access to care site experience with additional information beyond average wait times that Veterans have expressed matters to them	• Fosters VA as a leader in transparency • Builds trust with Veterans and external partners by providing a more user friendly, complete, and usable set of information on the website