



Approved
JH
2/5/10

Administrative Closure
Waiting Times for Mental Health Clinic Appointments
Atlanta VA Medical Center, Atlanta, Georgia

An anonymous complainant alleged that the Atlanta VA Medical Center (VAMC) had a waiting list with several hundred patients awaiting mental health clinic appointments. He has concerns about negative outcomes in patients before they can be seen.

We contacted the Medical Center Director on January 28 and he confirmed that as of January 10 there were 2,283 patients on the Electronic Waiting List (EWL) for appointments beyond 30 days for all clinics, 265 patients waiting for mental health appointments. He told us that last year at this time there were less than 400 patients on the EWL. The Director blamed an increased workload of unique patients but no concomitant increase in funding due to the Continuing Resolution.

At the request of the Atlanta Chief of Staff, the Co-Chair, Mental Health Sub-Committee of Health Systems Council and the Chief Medical Officer, VA Southeast Network conducted a review of mental health services at Atlanta and issued their report on January 7, 2010.

While the focus of their review was inpatient mental health services they did comment on the large number of veterans on the EWL. They noted that management of the Atlanta EWL is a "...long term rather than short term challenge..." and that "...Recent additions of mental health professionals to Community Based Outpatient Clinics may reduce the impact of referrals. Current numbers of veterans awaiting care...could be managed by an addition of a small (e.g. 3 FTEE: MD+SW+PhD) team. This appears to be the most at risk group needing the most immediate attention at the Atlanta VAMC."

The Director told us that he requested \$2.5 million from the VISN to address EWL issues. On January 29, 2010, the VISN approved \$2 million to address the EWL issues at the Atlanta VAMC.

Because VISN and VAMC managers are aware of the seriousness of the EWL issues and are taking actions to reduce the waiting times for mental health services, we make no recommendations and are administratively closing this case.