

VAU.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

News Release

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May 31, 2019**MESSAGE FROM VA Secretary Robert Wilkie - "Fact check" inaccuracies in a recent news article**

I want to call attention to several inaccuracies in a recent media ["fact check"](#) article that claimed the Trump administration is taking credit for progress made under the Obama administration.

This unfortunate piece went out of its way to misinterpret President Trump and my own words. Worse, it gets basic facts wrong in a way that could create a disincentive for Veterans to seek care at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We should all be encouraging our Veterans to use our hospitals and clinics, but pieces such as these paint an incorrect picture of the VA that runs the risk of discouraging Veterans from using the benefits they have earned.

For example:

1. The piece criticized President Trump for saying, "we passed VA choice and VA accountability," and for saying people have been "trying to pass these things for 45 years." AP concluded Trump was "wrong" because "Trump is not the first president in 45 years to get Congress to pass Veterans Choice."

The President knows what he was talking about, even if the AP doesn't. In 2018, President Trump signed into law the MISSION Act, which gives VA the ability to implement the best practices we've learned in our nearly 75 years of experience offering community care. It consolidates VA's community care efforts into a single, simple-to-use program that puts Veterans at the center of their VA health care decisions.

He wasn't referring to the Veterans Choice Act, which became law under the Obama administration and created a narrow, temporary choice program that wasn't seen by anyone as a final answer. Either through neglect or willful ignorance, the AP quoted the President as referring to "VA Choice," with a capital C, as if he meant that Obama-era bill, but he was referring to the concept of choice as defined in the MISSION Act.

Also, the piece conveniently leaves out the fact that President Trump signed the VA Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017, one of the most significant changes to civil service laws since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 was passed more than four decades ago.

2. Along the way to making that flawed argument, the AP misinterpreted a statement made by the VA's top health official, Dr. Richard Stone, who said implementation of the MISSION Act should "almost be a non-event." The AP took that line out of context and imagined it to mean that few Veterans will choose care outside the VA because wait times are longer in the private sector, in an apparent effort to dismiss the value of the law the President signed.

That's news to Dr. Stone. We checked with him, and he said his "non-event" comment referred to the idea that implementation of the MISSION Act would not create any technical problems that would interrupt Veterans' efforts to seek care at the VA. He made the comment in Senate testimony in March, after being asked whether the MISSION Act would create any drastic changes to how Veterans interact with their VA providers.

3. The piece said the "key to the Choice program's success is an overhaul of the VA's electronic medical records," which will take up to 10 years. It also said I have estimated that full implementation of the "expanded Choice program" is still years away.

This is pure conjecture on the part of AP, plus it's wrong.

The Choice program will actually cease to exist on June 6, as the MISSION Act will create a new program that consolidates all of VA's community care programs, including Choice. The AP's "fact checkers" seem unaware of this crucial fact.

Also, while electronic health records modernization is an important improvement, it's not central to the success of the MISSION Act. No one from the VA has ever said implementation of the new private care option Veterans will have under the MISSION Act is "years" away because of our effort to modernize health records.

4. The AP quoted me saying I took steps to make sure Veterans are at the center of their health care decisions, and connected that quote to another one in which I said, "One of the things that we're doing at VA is that we have same-day mental health service."

But in the Fox News interview, those two comments happened about six minutes apart from each other. The AP ignored the back and forth of the interview for that long and misleadingly made it appear as if this was a single, related thought.

5. Finally, the piece quoted me saying that my effort to put dedicated leaders in our VA hospitals and clinics helped reduce VA wait times, as seen in a Journal of the American Medical Association study.

The AP is correct: that study measured wait times up until 2017, before my tenure. VA is seeing enough signs of improvement that it's easy to confuse data sources under the hot lights of a TV set.

What I should have said was, we have our own internal data showing that wait times are continuing to improve since President Trump took office.

Our own data show the VA has completed more than 1.2 million more appointments through May 21 in FY 2019 compared to the same period the prior year, a sign our success in hiring more medical staff is bearing fruit for our Veterans.

Wait times for new primary and mental health care appointments have also fallen since President Trump took office.

Any one of us, including me, is capable of speaking imprecisely at times. But it's another thing entirely when "fact checkers" do it themselves.